Scuola Normale Superiore

Anno Accademico 2019-2020

Tesi di perfezionamento in Letteratura, arte, storia dell'Europa medievale e moderna
(L-LIN/10)

The Post-Romantic Flower Trope:
Poetic Creation, Metamorphic Bodies

Candidato: Giovanni Bassi (17977)

Relatori: Nadia Fusini, Massimo Stella

CONTENTS

Introduction: A Poetic Language of Flowers 3

1. Pre-Freudian, Post-Romantic Bouquets 9
2. Theoretical Roots 11
3. Romantic Flora 20
4. Victorian Flower Power 32
5. Varieties of the Flower Trope 39

1: Blooming Mythopoeia, Blossoming Words, Flower-like Bodies: Swinburne's Floral Imagery 54

1. Swinburne's Floral Species: Botany, Typology, and Atypicality 55
2. Swinburne's Visionary Flora and the Flowers of Snow 68
3. The Flowers of Fire 72
4. The Marine Blossoms 82
5. 'The Garden of Cymodoce': The Maternal in Bloom 86

2: Paterian Interlude: Aesthetic Initiation, 'Urbanatural' Landscape, and the Flowers of Art 112

3: Spinning Floral Shapes: Arthur Symons's Flower Images 125

1. Impressions of Blossoms 125
2. Flowers of Sex 131
3. Floral (Bodily) Rhythms 143

Bibliography 165

INTRODUCTION

A Poetic Language of Flowers

In the 1914 (fourth) edition of his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1st edn 1899-1900), a book which revolutionised Western hermeneutics, Sigmund Freud added a section that is rich in references to flowers. This addition is the interpolation of a dream recorded by Alfred Robitsek in 1912, and was inserted to object to the idea expressed by many opponents of psychoanalysis, such as the famous British psychologist Havelock Ellis (1859-1939), when they claimed that dream symbolism is not at work in non-neurotic subjects.[1] As opposed to such view, Freud quoted Robitsek's text as an example of how the dreams of normal people are not only equally analysable as symbolic products of 'repressed complexes […] operative alike in the healthy and the sick', but also easier to decipher than those of mentally ill patients because, due to the weaker 'workings of the censorhisp', their symbolism is far less opaque.[2] The section analyses the dream of a non-neurotic, though rather reserved and puritanical, English-speaking girl who was engaged, but whose marriage was likely to be delayed. In her dream, she happily arranged '*the centre of a table with flowers for a birthday*' in what it appeared to be her house.[3] Using the newly-minted interpretive tools of psychoanalysis, Robitsek explains the girl's dream as the manifestation of an unconscious (sexual) drive and concludes that 'the flower symbolism in this dream'

---

[1] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981; revised edn), V, p. 373. For Robitsek's interpolation see Giuseppe Civitarese, *Il sogno necessario. Nuove teorie e tecniche dell'interpretazione* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2013), p. 28.
[2] *The Standard Edition*, pp. 373-374.
[3] *The Standard Edition*, p. 374.

includes 'virginal femininity, masculinity and an allusion to defloration by violence'.[4] In particular, he offers a specific interpretation of all the three types of flowers arrayed in the centrepiece, which, tellingly, the girl immediately described as 'expensive'. The lilies of the valley are seen as a symbol of the girl's virginity, which she was eager to donate, like a precious gift, to her fiancé, whereas the carnations, which she was frequently and copiously given by him, are linked to the word 'incarnation', and therefore to fleshy and phallic connotations.[5] Finally, since the girl freely associated the violets with the verb 'violate', these 'ostensibly quite asexual' blossoms are interpreted as evidence of her sadomasochistic desire of defloration.[6] By the same token, the fact that she decorated the flower arrangement with 'green crinkled paper' in a bid to 'hide untidy things' between the blossoms is connected to her anxiety to amend her most intimate physical flaws – the velvety and mossy aspect of the paper hinting at her pubic hair.[7]

Almost at the beginning of his text, Robitsek remarks that popular flower symbolism was instrumental in his interpretation of the girl's dream – and one may speculate that Freud might have shared his opinion since he quoted him approvingly. However, despite Robitsek's acknowledgment of the role of this '"popular" symbolism' in his reading, the exact meaning of his phrase is not straightforward.[8] Given the time at which he wrote, it is plausible that his use of 'popular' may have been reminiscent of the centrality of this concept in the relatively new field of folklore studies, a discipline which had been flourishing since the first

[4] *The Standard Edition*, p. 376.
[5] *The Standard Edition*, pp. 374-375.
[6] *The Standard Edition*, p. 375.
[7] *The Standard Edition*, p. 376-377.
[8] *The Standard Edition*, p. 374.

decades of the nineteenth century. In this sense, the adjective 'popular' may have encompassed a spectrum of meanings from 'commonly known and 'generally accepted' (*OED*) to 'linked to the ordinary people' and 'low-culture', thus denoting a floral symbolism shared by a vast (and possibly or partly illiterate) group of people. Yet, it is interesting to note that, if it is true that there were a number of late nineteenth-century folklore books devoted to plants, such as Richard Folkard's voluminous *Plant Lore: Legends and Lyrics* (1884) and Angelo de Gubernatis's influential *La mythologie des plantes ou les légendes du règne vegetal* (1878), practically none of these compendia of the 'popular' symbolisms of the vegetable kingdom explicitly links blossoms to sexual desire.[9] On the contrary, these studies frequently incorporated in their vast repertoire of erudite notions drawn from literature, linguistics, mythology, and anthropology also a very popular and typical nineteenth-century system of significations related to flowers whose romantic (and at times saccharine) innocence is antipodal to Robitsek's focus on libido. Indeed, as we shall see below in further detail, at least since the third decade of the nineteenth century this specific type of flower symbolism had been variously systematised and popularised – mainly under the name of 'language of flowers' – in a number of books primarily intended for female readers which rapidly became fashionable among the Victorian and American middle and upper classes.[10] And yet, irrespective of the fact that his Anglophone girl probably belonged to this social milieu and was therefore familiar with this type of symbolism, Robitsek's psychoanalytic reading of her

---

[9] For folklore and blossoms see Beverly Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), 679 and Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp. 30-32. Significantly, the books on flower lore draw also on the symbolic meanings of flowers in nineteenth century literature and on the language of flowers.

[10] For this phenomenon see chiefly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*.

oneiric flora not only departs from, but starkly contrasts with the language of flowers, a fact which is even more revolutionary if we consider that he was certainly conversant with this cultural the phenomenon. Indeed, although this floral vogue gradually lost its lustre from last decades of the nineteenth century, its enduring relevance well into the following century is attested by the fact that Robitsek himself directly references – in quotation marks – and almost parodies the phenomenon in his paragraph on the violets.[11] If the language of flowers consists of a number of codified (if often recent and spurious) sets of sentimental meanings, Robitsek's interpretation postulates a carnal and less predictable symbolism, and this fundamental divergence accounts for the different meanings that Robitsek and the languages of flowers attribute to the types of blossoms dreamed by the girl. In the most influential flower books of nineteenth-century England, France and America, violets are generally viewed as a symbol of modesty, carnations symbolise pure love, and lilies of the valley – a common species of the genus *Convallaria* which Robitsek confuses, rather grossly, with true lilies (genus *Lilium*) – usually typify the return of happiness.[12]

Yet, despite this contrast between the relatively widespread codes of the language-of-flower books and Robitsek's interpretation, it is true that the association between flowers and sexuality – which is at the core of Robitsek's new, 'psychoanalytic', floral symbolism – was indeed 'popular' in 1912 in that it followed a long tradition in Western (and possibly Eastern) culture.[13] Indeed, this connection is directly or obliquely implied by the majority of the various meanings that have been attached to

---

[11] *The Standard Edition*, p. 375.
[12] See Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 172-173, 182-183, 196-197.
[13] See Amy M. King, *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6.

blossoms in the history of our civilisation, and may be seen as a key feature of an ever-evolving and expanding Indo-European flower symbolism which became increasingly more sophisticated over the course of the nineteenth century and whose more virtuous elements the inventors of the language of flowers capitalised on.[14] At the beginning of the twentieth century, when Freud and Robitsek wrote, this vast symbolic system was shared, although to different degrees, in Western Europe and the United States, and comprised, among many sources, the role of flora in classical mythology and culture – whose ritualistic and archaic aspects, tellingly, had been lately rediscovered and discussed –, Christian floral symbolisms such as flower emblems, and the parallel use of blossoms in medieval to early modern literary culture, as well as, more in general, every type of flower lore, from pre-industrial rural wisdom to advanced horticultural notions, from low-culture proverbs to the highly refined orientalist mania for exotic blossoms, from the treatment of flowers in gardening books and herbals to their prominence in the modern science of botany. (Incidentally, it is one of the constitutive principles of Linnaean and later Darwinian botany, namely that flowers are reproductive structures, which Robitsek ultimately alludes to when he points out that 'sexual flower symbolism […] symbolizes the human organs of sex by blossoms, which are the sexual organs of plants'.)[15] Moreover, and most cogently here, the notion of a turn-of-the-century flower symbolism, which is implicit in Freud and Robitsek's dream analysis, may have well included also the ubiquitous representations of flora in recent European and American literature, especially since here the sexual dimension of flowers had

---

[14] For a diachronic overview of flower meanings see Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics' and Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 36-60.
[15] *The Standard Edition*, p. 376.

powerfully come to the fore. Indeed, the sensuality (if not the sexuality) of blossoms was an important motif of several late eighteenth-century and Romantic literary texts, and became especially pervasive in post-Romantic and modernist literature. The innovative sensuousness of these images predated Freud's intuition of the primordial union of body, words, and mind, but their range of characteristics is vaster and diverse.

This study investigates these characteristics and the role of late nineteenth to early twentieth-century floral imagery in English and, to a far lesser degree, French literatures, with special reference to its structural link with the genesis of (poetic) language. While the remit of my study will be defined more completely below, a few methodological notes are here necessary. Geographically, my restriction to these two literary traditions is due to the fact that this phenomenon was here probably at its most developed, all the more so in that the intricate cultural and literary exchanges between France and England in the nineteenth century and beyond were often mediated by flower-related texts and discourses. Moreover, my primary emphasis on English literary culture responds to the fact that, while a moderate amount of attention has been paid to representations of flowers in nineteenth-century French poetry and novels, far less has been systematically dedicated to their English counterparts, which have been frequently relegated to a subservient or derivative status.[16] Historically, at least from the second half of the nineteenth century to the first two decades of the twentieth century, post-Romanic floral imagery may be treated as a 'master trope', a widespread system of significations which offers a

---

[16] For French nineteenth-century flower images see chiefly Philip Knight, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and Suzanne Braswell, 'Mallarmé, Huysmans, and the Poetics of Hothouse Blooms', *French Forum*, 38.1-2 (2013), 69-87.

special lens for observing the most revolutionary and peculiar aspects of the entire literary culture of the period. Formally, the types of linguistic phenomena which I include under the term 'Imagery' or 'Trope' are usually ascribable to metaphorical processes, but in a few cases they may be also analysed more specifically as instances of metonymy, synaesthesia, or simile. Terminologically, due to the unprecedented eminence of post-Romantic flower imagery, and in order to avoid ambiguity with a more generic use of blossoms in literature, I will refer to the object of this study as 'Trope' or 'Imagery' in any case in which, for the sake of readability, I choose not to employ or repeat long attributes such as 'post-Romantic' or 'late nineteenth to early twentieth-century'.

1. Pre-Freudian, Post-Romantic Bouquets

That the flower Trope anticipated many of the key concepts of psychoanalysis is testified by the significant degree of textual proximity of Robitsek's dream to a passage from one of the most visionary and revolutionary texts of nineteenth-century French literature, Arthur Rimbaud's collection of prose poems *Illuminations* (1886). One of the pieces in the volume, 'Fleurs', is here worth quoting at length both for its ineffability and its compactness:

> D'un gradin d'or, – parmi les cordons de soie, les gazes grises, les velours verts et les disques de cristal qui noircissent comme du bronze au soleil, – je vois la digitale s'ouvrir sur un tapis de filigranes d'argent, d'yeux et de chevelures.
> Des pièces d'or jaune semées sur l'agate, des piliers d'acajou supportant un dôme d'émeraudes, des bouquets de satin blanc et de fines verges de rubis entourent la rose d'eau.

> Tels qu'un dieu aux énormes yeux bleus et aux formes de neige, la mer et le ciel attirent aux terrasses de marbre la foule des jeunes et fortes roses.[17]

Like the flowers in the dream analysed by Robitsek, which are decorated by velvety 'green crinkled paper', here erotically-charged blossoms are enclosed by soft and uncanny fabrics – the silk, gauze, and green velvet covering the room, and especially the proto-Surrealist carpet made of silver filigree, eyes, and hair. If in Freud-Robitsek the paper is used to conceal strange 'untidy' things that dwell in the interstices between the cut flowers, here the textile materials upholster the surfaces around the blooming plant, and contribute to a sense of estrangement and almost nightmarish excess. In both texts the aura of mystery is connected with sexual undertones. While the flower bouquet dreamed by the girl symbolise her genitalia and her libidinal tension, in 'Fleurs' the atmosphere of voluptuous luxury, the excitement of the feminised roses for the Adonian god – a personification of the sea and the sky –, as well as the phallic aspect of the blooming foxglove ('la digitale') evoke a feeling of growing lust.

Apart from its connections with Freudian symbolism, Rimbaud's flower-related hallucination is particularly interesting because it exemplifies almost all the characteristics of the Decadent and proto-Modernist floral trope. The sexual dimension of 'Fleurs' runs alongside the rich sensuousness of its imagery. Like the most significant nineteenth-century poetic representations of blossoms, Rimbaud's epiphany is intensely stimulating not just for sight, but also for the sense of touch in that many of the materials represented – such as satin, skin and marble – suggest a

---

[17] Arthur Rimbaud, *Opere*, ed. by Diana Grange Fiori (Milano: Mondadori, 1975), pp. 324-326. For Rimbaud's flower imagery see W. M. Frohock, 'Rimbaud Amid Flowers', *Modern Language Notes*, 76.2 (1961), 140-143 and Knight, pp. 189-204.

specific tactile response. In this multisensory experience the normal state of matter alters and different substances melt into each other. Precious fabrics, plants, and minerals coalesce, as Jean-Pierre Richard has pointed out, and this metamorphic tension, which is a distinctive trait of the flower trope, culminates in the visionary image of the rose made of water ('la rose d'eau').[18] Just as the alluring blossoms of Decadence may turn out to be lethal flowers of evil, so the hypnotic world of Rimbaud's prose poem hides a deadly secret. Both leaves and flowers of the foxglove are toxic, and this dark aspect of the plant, along with its oblong and flamboyant flower stem, explains its frequent use in literature, especially in Romantic and Decadent works. (Intriguingly, the spots on the internal surface of the foxglove's 'inversely conical bells' almost resemble eyes, a fact which may have inspired Rimbaud's image of the eye-woven carpet.)[19] Nevertheless, despite this very faint trace of fin-de-siècle anxiety, Rimbaud's finely wrought prose poem, where natural objects are 'arranged as if by human hand',[20] may be read as a celebration of the creative power of language, a typically aestheticist ideal which is here hinted at by the conventional association of flowers (nature) with gems (art) and emblematised by the artificial bouquets of white satin. Almost an emotional correlative of this artistic triumph, the amorous passion which infuses the last paragraph offers an example of how (post-)Romantic poetry frequently combines personified flowers, an anthropomorphised landscape, and Pagan-inflected mythopoeia.

2. Theoretical Roots

[18] Quoted in Rimbaud, p. 813.

[19] See John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica, or The Language of Sentiments of Flowers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1869), p. 231

[20] Knight, p. 203.

Many examples of flower images that possess at least some of the features listed above had appeared in literature well before the second half of the nineteenth century. In the *Song of Solomon*, to give an illustrious and influential example, the eroticised body of the female beloved is frequently analogised to gardens, plants or flowers ('Thy two breasts *are* like two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies').[21] By the same token, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a text which is equally foundational for Western literary tradition, represents several transformations of gods and mortals into plants and – in four notable cases (Narcissus, Hyacinth, Adonis, and Clytie) – specifically blossoms.[22] While the metamorphoses into plants may be also the consequence of an illicit or forced sexual intercourse, those into flowers are exclusively the result of either an unrequited and destructive amorous passion or the accidental death of the mortal lover of a deity. In both cases the mutations into vegetal shapes may be seen as pointing towards the protean post-Romantic floral imagery, with which they share not merely their intrinsic metamorphic aspect, but also their decidedly sensual connotations.

More in general, and on a more theoretical level, one may argue that blossoms have acquired such a prominent place in literature due to their particular aesthetic characteristics. Indeed, according to Elaine Scarry, flowers have a very special relationship with the imagination (and thus with verbal creation) in that 'a blossom lends itself to being imagined, to being mentally captured in nearly the same degree

[21] *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 762.
[22] See Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics', p. 682.

of extraordinary vivacity it has in the perceptual world'.[23] Unlike many other things such as human faces, the mental pictures of which are far less vivid than the original perception of them, 'the daydreamed blossom […] expresses the capacity of the imagination to perform its mimesis [the mimesis of the perceptual experience, or 'perceptual mimesis'] so successfully that one cannot be sure an act of perception has not actually taken place'.[24] In other words, from a more literary perspective, flower images (whether mental or poetic) are experienced as so concrete and active on the sensorium that imagining a flower – and therefore talking or reading about a flower – is almost undistinguishable from perceiving one. (I assume that there is no substantial difference between mental images and poetic images, in that the latter may be ultimately viewed as a way of conveying – in the sense of evoking *and* transmitting – special types of the former.) While a certain degree of 'perceptual mimesis' is inherent to every act of imagining – Scarry goes as far as to say that 'imagining is an act of perceptual mimesis, whether undertaken in our own daydreams or under the instruction of great writers' –,[25] the intense feeling of sensorial immediacy related to imagining flowers indicates that the mimetic process is here at its most extreme, that here imagination and perception seem almost to conflate.

Scarry illustrates several reasons why blossoms are so conducive to perceptual mimesis. On a specifically sight-related level, she argues that the 'picturability' of

---

[23] Elaine Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers: *Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)*', in *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by John B. Bender and Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 97. This essay was first published in 1997.

[24] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', p. 97.

[25] Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 6. For an interesting reworking of Scarry's view of blossoms from a Freudian perspective see Jan Campbell, *Freudian Passions: Psychoanalysis, Form and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 33-58.

flora is linked to the fact that flowers 'appears to be the perfect size for imagining'.[26] Due to their dimension, blossoms tend to occupy a central position within our visual field – they are perceived right 'in front of our face' – and to maintain this spatial prominence also in our mental space.[27] They are immediately grasped by our vision and thus more profoundly impressed in our brain. Similarly, from the point of view of the shape of flowers, Scarry notes that the concavity of flower petals and corollas, which reproduces the curvature of human eyes, stimulates the perceptual effect of the imaginative process.[28] Moreover, if analysed in terms of the psychic energy consumed by the imagination, flower images stand out for their density ('localization' in Scarry's words). Since 'there is only a limited amount of energy […] with which to construct images', the smaller the image, the more "filled-in" it will be, with the result that relatively small images such as blossoms are usually very rich in details and sensorial intensity.[29] (Tellingly, this imagistic concentration is one of the most distinctive features of Romantic and post-Romantic symbolism.) Finally, perceptual mimesis is also bolstered by the vivid colours of flowers and the relative thinness of their structures. While blossoms may be imagined as thick, multisensory objects, they have been often envisaged – and represented – as extremely bright and almost immaterial things, 'two dimensional gauzy images', spots of prismatic light which are 'easily imitated in the mind'.[30] As we shall see below and in the next chapters, this luminous representation of flora, which Scarry connects to the Aristotelian concept of 'rarity', is typical of the flower Trope.

---

[26] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', pp. 98-99.
[27] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', p. 102
[28] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', p. 103.
[29] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', p. 104.
[30] Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', p. 108.

In addition to Scarry's original cognitive approach to floral imagery, other recent studies on perception and the senses, albeit not primarily focused on flowers, provide us with useful theoretical tools to explain the unique aesthetic status of blossoms. For instance, Brian Massumi's complex notion of 'biogram' offers an up-to-the-minute and compelling philosophical framework for many features of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century flower images. In his book *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Massumi postulates the biogram as the cross-sensory 'hinge-dimension' in which our two complimentary ways of experiencing reality – in his jargon, the Euclidean exoreferential and the non-Euclidean self-referential sense systems – synaestethically interact and blend.[31] The biogram, whose elusive yet constant operation is actively felt only in synaesthetic subjects, is a 'liminal nonplace' located on the border between inner and outer reality, in the 'otherwise empty and dimensionless plane between the eyes and the objects of the world'.[32] It is an abstract yet living 'space of experience', a 'virtual' – in the Deleuze-inflected sense of 'real and abstract' – surface in the time-space in which our experience is continuously formed and arranged.[33] Due to their polymorphousness, biograms are variously glossed by Massumi as 'synaesthetic forms', 'lived diagrams based on already lived experience, revived to orient further experience' (hence the name 'biograms'), and as 'event-perceptions combining different senses, tenses, and dimensions on a single surface'.[34] A complete description of Massumi's theory would far exceed the scope of this study, but my succinct account of its principles is

---

[31] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 182.
[32] Massumi, p. 187.
[33] Massumi, pp. 184, 190.
[34] Massumi, pp. 186-187.

sufficient here to show that there are several analogies between biograms and (post)-Romantic flower images (hypothetically, one may go as far as to consider the flower Trope as a particular artistic symbolisation of the biogram). Like Scarry's flower images and several examples of the floral Trope, biograms are perceived both as thick multidimensional objects and as transparent gemlike surfaces.[35] Moreover, the fact that biograms are hyperspaces of 'transformations' – intrinsically dynamic ('vectorial' and transient) spaces – chimes well with the metamorphic nature of floral Images.[36] Finally, the ultrasensuality of blossoms and of their Imagery may be almost seen as natural and literary-historical reifications of the synaesthetic essence of biograms.

Following Massumi and several other scholars, I have so far employed the concept of synaesthesia rather loosely in order to indicate the fundamental and inevitable interfusions between the senses occurring either in our psycho-cognitive experience or in literary and, more in general, verbal production. However, in contrast with this inclusive approach, numerous clinical and linguistic observations have circumscribed synaesthesia to a rather specific phenomenon, identifying several constraints on it both at the cognitive-pragmatic level (for instance, in terms of the ranking of the different senses involved in synesthetic metaphors) and at the purely textual one (synaesthesia usually conforms to precise morphosyntactic patterns).[37] In this sense, although it may occasionally – and significantly – fall into the category of true synaesthesia, the perceptual richness of floral imagery is better described by the

---

[35] Massumi, p. 187.
[36] Massumi, pp. 182, 184.
[37] See Sean Day, 'Synaesthesia and Synaesthetic Metaphors', *Psyche*, 2.32 (1996), <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-32-day.html> and Giovanna Marotta, 'Tra linguistica e letteratura: paradigmi e note sinestetiche', in *Modelli linguistici e metodi dell'interpretazione letteraria*, ed. by Gianni Iotti and Giovanna Marotta (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2018), pp. 187-206.

idea of cross-sensoriality or intersensoriality, a notion which literary and cognitive theorists such as Steve Connor have used as a more general alternative to synaesthesia in order to designate any type of commingling of the senses.[38] As I have argued many times above, flowers are constitutively multisensory. Their vibrant hues please our eyes, the feathery, velvety, or satiny surface of their petals entices and stirs our tactile receptors, their smells penetrate our nose, and instantly operate on our imagination and memory. Moreover, once encapsulated in poetic flower images – which inevitably imitate and at times even intensify the sensuality of their real counterparts – blossoms are also capable of appealing to our (inner) ears by virtue of the carefully orchestrated aural patterns of literary language. Because of its corroborative effect on the senses, the flower Trope is a perfect example of 'suraesthesia', the literary-historical process of exaltation of the sensorium which Connor, following Fredric Jameson's idea of the 'autonomization of the senses' at the end of the nineteenth century, rightly associates with modernity.[39] (In the light of these considerations, in the course of this book I will try as much as possible to deploy the word 'synaesthesia' and its derivatives in their more restricted sense.)

The congruence of the theoretical models discussed above with post-Romantic flower imagery is attested by the fact that they chime well with the poetics of the writers who most extensively deployed the floral Trope. In this sense, it suffices here to mention that, for their close attention to perception and the body, all these approaches hark back to that cornerstone of Aestheticism which is Walter Pater's

[38] Steve Connor, 'Intersensoriality', paper presented at the Conference of the Senses, Thames Valley University, 6 February 2004. The text can be read here: <http://stevenconnor.com/intersensoriality.html> [accessed 3 June 2020].

[39] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), pp. 220-225.

thinking. More in particular, while Massumi's insistent recourse to the adjective 'diaphanous' is reminiscent of the centrality of similar terms in Pater's aesthetics, Scarry's perspective on real and poetic flowers is remarkably in tune with Pater's use of blossoms in what is probably his most famous essay, the 'Conclusion' to his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Indeed, in the essay Pater – whose oeuvre is interspersed with flower images – seems almost to advocate Scarry's idea of the perceptual immediacy of flora. Pater's argument in the 'Conclusion' is fairly well-known. Since external reality is reducible to a Heraclitean flux of ever-combining elements and forces, and (inward) life to an equally fleeting 'swarm' of 'unstable, flickering, inconsistent' impressions, exposing ourselves to the highest possible number of sensorial 'pulsations' of the most stimulant and refined 'quality' is the only way to some form of happiness, knowledge, and possibly – pace the Victorian outcry against Pater's supposedly licentious teachings – moral truth.[40] Blossoms are instrumental in Pater's exposition of the key lesson of his aesthetics:

> While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems, by a lifted horizon, to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange flowers, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.[41]

Not only are flowers the most material of the three things listed by Pater as particularly exciting for the senses, but they also contain – intersensorially – the other two. Blossoms, especially if 'strange', are naturally imagined as a source of 'strange dyes' and 'curious odours'. Moreover, flowers stimulate not merely the senses of

---

[40] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 119-121.
[41] Pater, p. 120.

sight and smell, but also that of touch, therefore constituting the sublimation of the impressionistic sequence of 'colour, odour, texture' into which, as Pater remarks in the second paragraph of the 'Conclusion', 'each object is loosed' 'in the mind of the observer'.[42] In this sense, together with male friendship and art, flowers may be viewed as the embodied ideal of Pater's Impressionism.

For all its original aspects, Pater's emphasis on blossoms as emblems of sensorial concreteness had several illustrious antecedents. Among the philosophical ones, Hegel is particularly noteworthy because, unlike many of his Romantic and Idealist contemporaries, he capitalised on flowers not merely to symbolise the organic nature of his system of thought, but also – at least in one occasion – to specify the anti-Romantic concreteness of his philosophy. In a passage from his *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy* – which is translated and commented on by the American critic M. H. Abrams in the seminal *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Evolution in Romantic Literature* (1971) – Hegel remarks that 'the pure idea […] "is essentially concrete, like a flower," which is "a unity of leaves, of form, of colour, of smell'.[43] Formally, as is shown by their common reference to colour and odour, Hegel is here very close to Pater in that he uses the intersensoriality of flora as a metaphor for an essential quality of his own philosophy. Apart from the fact that Pater's 'aesthetic historicism' is famously indebted to Hegel's thinking, this convergence is not fortuitous. It is with Romantic literary culture, which both Hegel and Pater –

---

[42] Pater, p. 119. Tellingly, Pater omitted his reference to blossoms in the following edition of the text, presumably due to its overly evident connection with French post-Romantic poetics.
[43] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Evolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 175, 431. For Hegel's opposition to Romantic organicism see Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 218.

partly via Hegel – reacted to and reworked, that flowers attained a unique aesthetic status.[44]

3. Romantic Flora

The influential and much dissected section 'Of the Pathetic Fallacy' from John Ruskin's *Modern Painters, III* (1856) problematises a structural aspect of the representation of blossoms in Romantic literature:

> So, then, we have the three ranks: the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose, because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy's shield, or a forsaken maiden. And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself—a little flower apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it, whatever and how many soever the associations and passions may be that crowd around it.[45]

The section – which serves as an aesthetic framework to Ruskin's observations on landscape painting – focuses on how feelings, especially if 'violent' and not properly kept at bay, may distort our perception and description of 'external things'.[46] Ruskin aptly terms such psychological condition, which is in many respects 'diseased or false', 'pathetic fallacy' – the titular phrase and his coinage –, and explicitly links it to

---

[44] For Hegel and Pater see William Shuter, 'History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel', *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 411-421; Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1989); Giles Whiteley, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (London: Legenda, 2010).

[45] John Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 73-74.

[46] Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, p. 71.

poetry.[47] As opposed to dull philistines and to the apparent impassibility of the greatest poets (the first and third ranks in the passage above), it is the 'Reflective or Perceptive' poets of the 'second order' which, in his view, tend to project their emotions onto external things and thus to subjectify – i.e. either anthropomorphise or personify – nature.[48] Being characteristic of a group of poets, this altered state of consciousness manifests itself in poetic depictions of natural objects, and Ruskin's choice of the (flower) image of the primrose reinforces this connection with verse. Indeed, Ruskin's passage is most certainly indebted to Wordsworth's long poem *Peter Bell: A Tale* (1819), where the blossom – a favourite of Wordsworth – epitomises the protagonist's negative insensibility to the natural world: 'A primrose by a river's brim | A yellow primrose was to him, | And it was nothing more'.[49] The allusion to Wordsworth, along with many other clues in Ruskin's text such as the numerous quotations from Romantic poets, the concept of reflexive poetry, and the attack on Coleridge's German-derived categories of objectivity and subjectivity, suggests an equation between pathetic fallacy and Romantic poetry, but this identification is less clear-cut than it may appear in that Ruskin somewhat confusedly distinguishes between various cases of more or less condemnable fallacy, and ascribes the phenomenon not only to the poets which he explicitly includes in the 'second order' – the Romantics Wordsworth and John Keats, and the Romantic-influenced Victorian Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson –, but also to others such as the Augustan and decidedly not Romantic Alexander Pope.

[47] Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, pp. 71, 75.
[48] Ruskin, *Selected Writings*, p. 71.
[49] William Wordsworth, *Peter Bell, A Tale in Verse* (London: Longman, 1819), p. 19. For Wordsworth's primroses see Peter Dale and Brandon C. Yen, *Wordsworth's Gardens and Flowers: The Spirit of Paradise* (Woodbridge: ACC Art Books, 2018), pp. 219-223. For Wordsworth's flora, in addition to this monograph, see also M. M. Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7-48.

Nevertheless, although Ruskin's idea of pathetic fallacy is subtly nuanced and do not overlap completely with Romantic verse, the communion of feelings between the poetic I and nature, which Ruskin critically targets, is one of the most distinctive features of English Romantic poetry. Indeed, for all their individual and at times radical differences, all Romantic poets represented nature – and therefore flowers – as infused with the speaker's feelings and profoundly sympathetic with them. This widely-shared Romantic position towards natural objects is aptly formulated in what amounts to the manifesto of English Romanticism, the 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800, 1802), where Wordsworth not only defends his innovative focus on rustic life by remarking that in common life 'the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature', but also – as opposed to Ruskin – characterises a poet precisely as a man who relishes contemplating his human 'volitions and passions […] in the goings-on on the Universe'.[50]

As a consequence of this humanised conception of nature, in Romantic verse blossoms often reflects and interacts with the speaker's interiority, and flower metaphors frequently shade into personification proper. Eminent critics such as Josephine Miles and scholars of flower lore such as Beverly Seaton have convincingly shown how floral imagery was infused with new blood in the Romantic age.[51] If it is true that blossoms have been personified (and thus subjectified) since classical literature, Romantic flowers differ from many of their antecedents in that they not merely analogise human passions in general, but usually symbolise highly

[50] *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2014), pp. 78, 85.
[51] See Josephine Miles, *The Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Octagon, 1965) and Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics', pp. 693-696. For Romantic flowers see also Robert M. Maniquis, 'The Puzzling "Mimosa": Sensitivity and Plant Symbols in Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 8.3 (1969), 129-155; Mahood, pp. 82-146 and Kelley, pp. 1-51, 126-158, 210-245.

idiosyncratic and intimate (if not inscrutable) feelings, often associated with the speaker, the narrator, or a specific character. Due to such connection with emotion, these blossoms betoken some form of bond between the mysterious forces of nature and human mind, and thus contribute to an original, frequently mythopoeic and visionary symbolism. It is by virtue of this revolutionary lyricism that Romantic flower images depart from their immediate precursors in eighteenth-century poetry such as the blossoms represented in mythological scholarly verse in the manner of Abraham Cowley's *Plantarum Libri Sex* (1662; 1668), in atmospheric poems on landscape and seasons, and in Erasmus Darwin's popular *Botanic Garden* (1791; 1789).[52] Darwin's poem – which, from our perspective, is probably the most noteworthy in this group of texts – creatively blends traditional mythological personification, recent scientific notions, and original mythopoeia, and aims at divulging the sexual system of Linnaean botany through the poetic medium. If his didactic purposes are in key part incompatible with the aesthetic autonomy of later flower images, Darwin's at times graphic representation of the sexuality of plants as well as the strong visual quality of his verse – which seeks to sing 'How laugh the Pleasures in the blossom's bell' – may be seen as pointing towards Romantic and post-Romantic floral imagery.[53]

Some late eighteenth-century works – many of which are related to botany like Darwin's poem and the verse of Charlotte Smith (1749-1807), another disseminator of Linnaean taxonomy – anticipated Romantic floral imagery not just for their attention

---

[52] See Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics', pp. 691-693.
[53] Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden. A Poem, in Two Parts* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1798), II, p. 12. For Erasmus Darwin see Mahood, pp. 49-81; Kelley, pp. 78-89 and Rosalind Powell, 'Poetry, Linnaeus, Analogy, and Taxonomy: Botanical Naming and Categorization in Erasmus Darwin and Charlotte Smith', *Philological Quarterly*, 95.1 (2016), 101-24.

to inner life, but also for their relative abundance of naturalistic details.[54] Indeed, Ruskin's accusations of falseness notwithstanding, the Romantic internalisation of nature often amounts to a new, quintessentially modern form of realism.[55] Whether it is regarded as a reflection or an extension of the speaker, or as part of an all-pervading entity, every aspect of nature – even the most minute and insignificant – is worth the poet's attention because it is capable of encapsulating the essence of the world inside and outside us. In this sense, the Romantics were, on the whole, scarcely (or rather, unconventionally) interested in 'general properties and large appearances' of things, and often turned the early and mid-eighteenth-century predilection for abstract generalisation into a celebration of living singularity.[56] Swerving away from classicising poetic precepts such as Samuel Johnson's famous claim that the poet 'does not number the streaks of the tulip',[57] Romantic verse depicts blossoms in an (a)typical rather than (proto)typical way, as if they were really present before the speaker's and the reader's eyes; frequently it emphasises their sensorial quality and zooms in on their physical details (such as the shape of their petals), at times even infusing them with expressive and symbolic values. As we shall see below, this concentration on the particularity and sensuousness of flowers, which is in key part only germinal in Romantic works, greatly increased in the course of the century. If the writer John Aikin (1747-1822) conceded in his plea for scientific realism in literature that 'the vegetable creation, delightful as it is to the senses […]

---

[54] For Charlotte Smith see Kelley, pp. 116-125 and Powell.

[55] William K. Wimsatt, Jr., 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery', in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), p. 82.

[56] Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 28.

[57] Johnson, p. 28. Johnson's view of blossoms paralleled his condemnation of the emphasis on particularity in metaphysical poetry, and directly reacted to horticultural and botanical principles. See Ranjan Ghosh, *Transcultural Poetics and the Concept of the Poet: From Philip Sidney to T. S. Eliot* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 62-89.

yields comparatively few materials to the poet, whose art is principally defective in representing those qualities in which it chiefly excels; colour, scent, and taste', much nineteenth-century literature proved him wrong.[58] After being originally explored in Romantic literature, the 'delightful' intersensoriality of flowers imposed itself as one of the central components of the floral Trope.

The epochal poetic and critical shift determined by the Romantic approach to nature is beautifully phrased by Paul de Man who has pointed out how in Romantic literature, in which he practically includes also post-Romantic poetry like Baudelaire's, there is 'a return to a greater concreteness, a proliferation of natural objects', while 'At the same time [...] the structure of the language becomes increasingly metaphorical and the image – be it under the name of symbol or even of myth – comes to be considered as the most prominent dimension of the style'.[59] As poetic language sought to get 'closer and closer to the ontological status of the object',[60] from the late eighteenth century onward blossoms began to be represented as a curious mix of spirituality and materiality, and became an increasingly common (if not fashionable) literary theme as well as a totemic motif for the poetics of many writers and poets.

That Romantic poetics were at the same time the consequence, the counterpart, and the origin of new conceptions of the world and the self is a familiar enough fact. In light of my argument here, however, it is worth remarking how the various aesthetics and systems of thought related to Romanticism – which closely

---

[58] Quoted in Powell, p. 102.

[59] Paul de Man, 'Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image', in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 66-77.

[60] De Man, p. 70. I do not share de Man's idea that the 'paradoxical' – visionary and sensorial – nature of nineteenth-century poetry necessarily leads to a sort of 'failure' (see de Man, p. 70). Seizing on the object only linguistically – through language – is, from a purely poetical perspective, completely the opposite of a failure.

investigated the vegetable kingdom and often went as far as to analogise plants to the creative mind – blazed the trail for the post-Romantic equation between flora and art. It is difficult to trace the precise origin of this aestheticist idealisation of blossoms, but this process was already (albeit subtly) operative in the works of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a watershed between eighteenth-century and Romantic patterns of thinking. Indeed, if in his pivotal *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Edmund Burke (1729-1797) extolled blossoms as 'the most beautiful part of the vegetable world' because they exhibit several of the sensorial properties he associated with our experience of natural and artificial beauty (namely, 'smoothness', 'delicacy', and 'sweetness'),[61] three decades later Kant's transcendental angle on beauty and flowers departed from Burke's mechanistic psychology towards a more structural correlation between blossoms and works of art.

In the 'third moment' of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful' in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant significantly mentions tulips as an example of how 'Beauty is the form of purposiveness in an object, so far as this is perceived in it apart from the representation of an end'.[62] In less esoteric terms, Kant argues that we experience a disinterested 'feeling of pleasure' from our perception of an object – and thus characterise such object as beautiful –, insofar as we perceive it as a thing which is formed as if it had an end, even though it appears to have no end.[63] A beautiful object – as we may encounter both in nature and in 'fine art' – has a formal

[61] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 86.
[62] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by James Creed Meredith, ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 66.
[63] Kant, p. 52.

organisation which suggests the presence of an end (this is Kant's meaning of 'purposiveness') despite the fact that we are not able to assign any particular purpose to the representation through which this object is given and judged aesthetically. As indicated by my emphasis on the slightly technical concept of 'representation', Kant does not go as far as to say that what is beautiful must have, *constitutively*, no external ends, but limits himself to state that, with some exceptions, we do not perceive any purpose in beautiful objects when we judge them aesthetically. However, it is here essential to notice that the mere possibility of an aesthetic object with no extra-aesthetic ends – which is almost presupposed by Kant's theory – verges on the various autotelic conceptions of art and literature that the floral Trope often emblematised. (Incidentally, it is in Benjamin Constant's diaristic reflections on Kant that one may find one of the first occurrences of the phrase 'l'art pour l'art' – which is how nineteenth-century autoreferential poetics were, and still are, often referred to.)[64] From the privileged perspective of early Modernist poetics, it is then absolutely no wonder that flowers meet Kant's requirement of 'formal purposiveness': 'A flower […], such as a tulip, is regarded as beautiful, because we meet with a certain purposiveness in its perception, which, in our judgement of it, is not referred to any end whatever'.[65] Kant's association between beauty and flowers in this passage, however, is also very predictable in that it is remarkably consistent with his treatment of plants in the third *Critique*.

---

[64] See Rachel Polonsky, 'Poe's Aesthetic Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 38; Andrew McNeillie, 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 22; James Vigus, 'Continental Romanticism in Britain', in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. by David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 697-698.

[65] Kant, p. 67.

Although he highlights its purely formal quality and significantly links it to '*design*' in the case of visual arts,[66] Kant is not very specific in describing purposiveness as a criterion of aesthetic judgement (the rather elusive 'formal purposiveness'). In comparison, he is much more concrete in his discussion of 'real' or 'objective' purposiveness, which he envisages as a convenient way of rationally understanding living beings.[67] Indeed, in the third *Critique* Kant shows not only how the power of judgement operates, as aesthetic judgement, in our appreciation of beauty, but also how, as teleological judgement, it assists our understanding in its exploration of natural organisms, enabling us to fully grasp how they are structured as 'natural ends'.[68] The second part of the book, the 'Critique of Teleological Judgement', discusses how, in order 'to make intelligible to ourselves the organic existences in this phenomenal world, we are constrained to view them, not as a system of efficient causes, but as "natural purposes"; that is' as organisms, 'things which develop towards ends which are inherent in the organism itself',[69] '*organized* and *self-organized*' beings, like plants, where every part constantly generates the other parts and appears to exist '*for the sake of the others* and of the whole' (202).[70]

Scholars have pointed out that Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgement is overly focused on natural beauty, and Kant himself comments in many passages on the complex relation and the eloquent similarities between natural objects – whether beautiful or not – and works of art.[71] In this regard, if seen against his discussion of organisms, Kant's seemingly casual choice of blossoms as an example of beautiful

[66] Kant, p. 56.
[67] Kant, p. 28.
[68] Kant, p. 28.
[69] M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 208.
[70] Kant, p. 202.
[71] Nicholas Walker, 'Introduction', in Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, ed. by Walker, p. xvi.

objects becomes extremely meaningful and his concept of 'formal purposiveness' less abstract. If, as Theresa Kelley has acutely pointed out, 'Like the objects of aesthetic judgments, the teleology of organic beings exhibits a purposiveness without purpose […] in the sense that organisms cannot be assigned a purpose beyond that of their own in-ner-directedness',[72] one may go as far as to speculate about the other way round, namely that the 'formal purposiveness' of aesthetic objects should entail a quintessentially formal teleology of works of art, that is a condition of self-referentiality. Kant, who was certainly conversant with other contemporary organicist theories of the artistic genius like Goethe's, Sulzer's, and Herder's,[73] seems to have been just 'briefly attracted to think about nature as an analogue to art' in that he never explicitly formulates this analogy and appears simply inclined to contemplate that art may operate as an analogue of natural beauty.[74] However, if one postulates, as Kant does, that 'Nature works *mechanically*, as *mere nature*, in producing aggregates, but it works *technically*, i.e. *artistically*, in producing systems, for example, crystals, all sorts of flower forms, or the internal structure of plants and animals', it is therefore tempting to deduce that a work of 'fine art' has to be perceived and therefore structured as a self-organised and self-developing organism.[75] (Kant negates the possibility of an internal self-generation in artistic products, but several later flower-related poetics and poems fully embraced this idea.) From the perspective of this study, the implication of Kant's aesthetics is that plants and even more so flowers are not merely one of the aptest metaphors for representing works of art, but the actual reification of the concept of art for art's sake.

---

[72] Kelley, p. 219.
[73] For which see Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 201-206.
[74] Kelley, p. 219.
[75] Kant, p. 329.

Kant's works were a direct source for some of the English Romantics, notably Coleridge, who contributed to popularising Kantian concepts in England.[76] However, an in-depth discussion of whether or how the Romantics reworked Kant's aesthetics and epistemology is here rather pointless: it suffices to say that, consciously or not, they all radicalised Kant's tentative parallel between beauty, art, and vegetable beings in favour of an organic interfusion of man and his artistic products with nature. Those of them who were directly influenced by post-Kantian and Idealist doctrines, such as Coleridge, posited 'organicity' (or purposiveness) not merely as a regulative principle of our reason, like Kant's 'heuristic expedient',[77] but as a constitutive characteristic of the world. In this respect, by his own admission, Coleridge owed much to Friedrich Schelling's idealism of nature, both to its still (tepidly) Fichtean ego-centric formulation in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) and to its later Spinozist 'ideal-realist' revision. Although he never fully adhered to Schelling's almost pantheistic idea of 'the natural world as the ego's coequal', in some phases of his poetic and essayistic production Coleridge almost espoused Schelling's view that 'nature both reflects intelligence and has all of its structural principles and laws isomorphic with those of intelligence'.[78] As a consequence of their common belief in a '*bond* between *Nature* […] and the soul of man', both Schelling and Coleridge strictly correlated organic nature with art, and viewed the latter as a product of the creative imagination, a faculty which is central

---

[76] For Kant's influence on the English Romantics see at least René Wellek, *Immanuel Kant in England 1793-1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931); Donald G. Marshall, 'Kant and English Nature Poetry', *The Iowa Review*, 21.2 (1991), 78-83; Theresa Kelley, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Vigus, pp. 691-706.
[77] Robert J. Richard, *The Romantic Conception of Life : Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 158.
[78] Richard, p. 157. For Coleridge and Schelling see Raimonda Modiano, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1985) and Giles Whiteley, *Schelling's Reception in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), especially pp. 49-58, 179-184.

in Schelling's system, and famously integral to Coleridge's poetics and criticism.[79] Just as Schelling opined that 'every plant is a symbol of intelligence', Coleridge claimed that 'a man of genius finds a reflex of himself' in nature.[80] In Coleridge's most Schelling-inflected passages, the imaginative and psychic energy itself may be seen as communal with the forces of nature, and the creative process is therefore viewed as the actualisation of the eternal generative dynamism of the natural universe (in Coleridge's words, 'a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM').[81] From this biological perspective, it goes without saying that a poem has to be devised as an organic balance between 'the *whole*' and 'each component *part*'.[82] Similarly, other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), who were fundamentally unacquainted with German organic theories, variously regarded nature and the poetic I – or even verse itself – as two parts of the same mysterious spirit of the world, of the same 'great mind', of a creative cosmic energy.[83] The genealogy and fortune of Romantic organicism have been discussed by many scholars, at least since M. H. Abrams's field-defining *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (1953).[84] Even though, with the possible exception of Shelley's, they are centred on plants rather than specifically on blossoms, Romantic organicist aesthetics laid the groundwork for the floral Trope in that they pioneered and cemented the analogy between the growth of plants, and the genesis of literary language.

---

[79] Modiano, p. 54.
[80] Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism*, p. 276. Richard, p. 158.
[81] I quote from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817). See *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), p. 488.
[82] *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, p. 493. I quote again from *Biographia Literaria*.
[83] *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), p. 522. I quote from Shelley's 'A Defence of Poetry', written in 1821.
[84] Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, especially pp. 184-225.

4. Victorian Flower Power

Romantic conceptions and poetics of nature underwent various changes in the course of the late Romantic and early Victorian period, a process which culminated into the rise of the flower Trope from around the middle of the century. As early as the third decade of the century, both Tractarian writers – like the poet and clergyman John Keble (1792-1866) – and Low-Church thinkers seized on the Romantic idealisation of nature as an effective way to demonstrate the existence of God through the beautiful forms of the natural world. In several systems of thought of the early Victorian age the Romantic view of nature as a receptacle of the intimate feelings of the subject gave way to a more universal (and therefore allegorical) language of types, where the natural world is not glorified as a symbol of the poetic 'I', but of the divine creator.[85] Partly as a consequence of this, much poetry and prose of the period began to put into question the structural Romantic communion between self and nature, a fact which chimes well with the contemporary emergence of a more general scepticism about the integrity and conscious powers of the human mind. Almost paradoxically – and frequently as a reaction to the numerous advancements in the fields of biology, botany, and natural sciences in general – in Victorian aesthetics and poetics Christian typology often combines with a strong, at times even excessive, attention to naturalistic details.[86] This somewhat morbid poetic focus on minute natural things,

---

[85] See Lothar Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and 'Fin de Siècle'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 9-13; Mahood, p. 44
[86] Lothar Hönnighausen, pp. 6, 39-47. For Victorian poetics of nature see Hönnighausen, pp. 1-81; Pauline Fletcher, *Gardens and Grim Ravines: The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

which paralleled and often directly reacted to a similar abundance of particulars in the novelistic production of the time, has been described by many literary critics, most notably Carol Christ, who has aptly termed this literary tendency as a pervasive 'aesthetic of particularity', and has acutely noted how figures as diverse as Tennyson, Robert Browning, Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Ruskin all 'pursued the accurate observation of nature more zealously than any Romantic', yet – although to different degrees – 'decreasingly felt any sympathetic power in nature'.[87]

More specifically, as regards Victorian blossoms, these two complimentary (typological and hyper-realistic) conceptions of nature – which represented the evolution of a similar dichotomy between real and ideal in Romantic literature – underpinned the widespread early and mid-century phenomenon of the language(s) of flowers. Indeed, from the 1820s various and relatively new sets of significations attributed to blossoms were organised in vocabulary lists and popularised by many books specifically dedicated to the subject (the language-of-flower books) as well as by more general and omnipresent flower-related publications integrating floral symbolism into domestic horticulture, floral mythology, or plant history.[88] Coming from France, where it had been formulated at least a decade earlier, in England the language of flowers remained in vogue longer than on the Continent, as is attested by the fact that, unlike their French equivalents, several English language-of-flower books were still published or reprinted in the last two decades of the century.[89] Chronological differences apart, both French and English publications on the

---

[87] Carol T. Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 18. For an overview on the Pre-Raphaelites and flora see Debra N. Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Munich: Prestel, 2003).
[88] Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 1-60. See also Beverly Seaton, 'Considering the Lilies: Ruskin's "Proserpina" and Other Victorian Flower Books', *Victorian Studies*, 28.2 (1985), 255-282.
[89] Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, p. 84.

language of flowers connected the origin of this symbolic system to the *sélam* – an alleged secret form of communication between the girls in Turkish harems and their lovers outside – and more specifically to the romanticised description of such exotic practice in early eighteenth-century travel chronicles such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) and Aubry de La Mottraye's *Voyages du Sieur A. de La Motraye, en Europe, Asie et Afrique* (1723, 1727). In reality, as the *sélam* was 'merely a harem game' and relied on rhyme rather than on symbolism proper, the first compilers of language-of-flower-books created a new sentimental, chaste, and quintessentially bourgeois floral symbolism by mixing together various symbolic meanings attributed to blossoms in Western and – to a lesser degree, and in a rather distorted way – Eastern cultures.[90]

From the point of view of literature, the language of flowers and, more in general, the Victorian floral mania to which the former contributed, may be seen as adding to the progressive emancipation of literary floral imagery from the organicist subjectivism of Romantic flora. Because codified flower symbolisms became such a popular cultural phenomenon, they provided poets and writers with a viable alternative to flower images based on the communion between natural world and the feelings of the poetic 'I'. Indeed, much Victorian poetry and prose is rich in floral symbols, and at times directly engaged in dialogue with the language of flowers. In the specific case of poetry, on the one hand, the treatment of blossoms became more frequent than ever and was often synchronised with popular floral codes; on the other, several poets took delight in either subverting or subtly playing with popular

[90] Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 1-6, 36-38, 61-197.

sets of codified floral meanings.[91] If Christina Rossetti's reworking of Christian floral emblems is undoubtedly one of the most blatant examples of this interaction,[92] in other cases Victorian poets alluded to the fashion of floral symbols much more obliquely, such as in Tennyson's short poem 'Flower in the crannied wall' (published in 1869), where the speaker questions both mythopoeic ('man') and typological ('God') readings of blossoms:

> Flower in the crannied wall,
> I pluck you out of the crannies,
> I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,
> Little flower – but *if* I could understand
> What you are, root and all, and all in all,
> I should know what God and man is.[93]

In general, as is suggested by the incredulity of Tennyson's speaker, the use of floral imagery in Victorian poetry should not be merely connected to the typically-Victorian poetic focus on particularity and sensuousness, but also seen against the well-known split nature of the Victorian poetic 'I' and the centrality of language in Victorian verse.[94] On the one hand, due to a larger role of sensuality in poetry – a process which began with the second-wave Romantics Shelley and Keats, permeated

---

[91] For blossoms in Victorian poetry see Mahood, pp. 28-48; Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Farnahm and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 1-150.

[92] For Christina Rossetti floral imagery see Moine, pp. 99-150; Gisela Hönnighausen, 'Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry*, 10.1 (1972), 1-15.

[93] *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 619. For Tennyson and nature see Fletcher, pp. 18-72. Victorian readers positively reacted to Tennyson's use of blossoms, to the point that are several nineteenth-century publications on the subject. See for instance J. Hutchison, 'Mr Tennyson as a Botanist', *The Saint Pauls Magazine*, 13 October 1873, pp. 443-452.

[94] See Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993), especially pp. 9-16 (but this point is developed throughout the whole book); E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), especially pp. 1-63; and E. Warwick Slinn, 'Experimental Form in Victorian Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 46-66 and Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957).

Victorian verse via Arthur Hallam's poetics of the senses, and then peaked in Aestheticism – Victorian blossoms are often represented as extremely sensual objects.[95] On the other, since Victorian poetry frequently departs from the unity of the poetic 'I' and his/her interfusion with nature towards 'linguistic self-consciousness and textual defensiveness', Victorian floral images often stand metaphorically for the autonomous creative power of literary language.[96]

In this sense, it is no wonder that the floral Trope emerged when, with the advent of the concept of art for art's sake, the highly sensual and purely linguistic Victorian conceptions of blossoms successfully merged. Indeed, despite their numerous differences, the artist James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903), the poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), and the critic and writer Walter Pater (1839-1904) – who were among the first to pioneer and champion in England the aestheticist (and often French-derived) theories of the independence of art from non-aesthetic ends – all viewed blossoms as perfect emblems of their much-desired aesthetic ideal, the fusion of materiality and formality in the work of art. In this respect, Whistler's floral imagery is indicative. In the brief piece of prose *Propositions – No. 2*, which was first published in the catalogue for an 1884 exhibition, Whistler, in discussing 'what constitutes a finished picture', opines that

> The masterpiece should appear as the flower to the painter – perfect in its bud as in its bloom – with no reason to explain its presence – no mission to fulfil – a joy to the artist - a delusion to the philanthropist - a puzzle to the botanist - an accident of sentiment and alliteration to the literary man.[97]

---

[95] For Hallam's poetics see Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, especially pp. 23-92.
[96] Slinn, 'Experimental Form', p. 56.
[97] *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings of James McNeill Whistler*, ed. by Nigel Thorp (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2004), p. 78

While blossoms are enigmatic for botanists because they observe nature 'with the enlarging lens' in a futile attempt to 'gather facts' – as Whistler wittily remarks in his famous public lecture *Ten O'Clock* (1885) – here flora aptly emblematises the ideal of a perfectly-designed and self-sufficient work of art.[98] To the artist's eyes blossoms represent not just a 'choice selection of brilliant tones and delicate tints', but also an insuperable example of harmonious composition.[99]

As is indicated by Whistler's attention to the purely visual (sensorial) dimension of the painting-as-flower, blossoms do not merely furnish the aesthete with an analogue of his/her autotelic conception of art, but also offer him a luxuriant repertoire of sensual stimuli. In this sense, it is important to note that, unlike their Romantic predecessors, late nineteenth-century poets and writers paid decidedly more attention to flowers than to plants more in general. Since literature, once purged of its strictly sentimental and moral purposes, was revered in all its formal, and therefore sensual, aspects, it was blossoms – the most sensually stimulating part of the plant – which poet and writers naturally capitalised on. As Alison Syme has pointed out, in post-Romantic poetics 'the creative organ was no longer the mind, but the hand, […] an organ co-opted by a drive'.[100] Indeed, as it will be discussed in further detail below and especially in the following chapters, the conceptions of poetic language underpinned by the floral Trope usually posit literary creation as a decidedly physical (if not sexual) process, an operation located in an embodied and at times unconscious creative faculty rather than in the somewhat etherealised and ego-related Romantic imagination.

---

[98] *Whistler on Art*, p. 86.
[99] *Whistler on Art*, p. 86.
[100] Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-siècle Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), p. 4.

Because of its structural link with verbal creation, sensual excess, and aesthetic autonomy, three concepts that are almost integral to the poetic genre, the floral Trope occurs far less frequently in Victorian fictional prose than in contemporary poetry (and possibly also slightly less frequently than in contemporary essays – where such aesthetic concepts were at times discussed and therefore somewhat equally represented). Although floral symbolism plays a significant role in Victorian fiction – as has been recently pointed out by scholars such as Amy King and Lynn Voskuil – it is in poetry that floral Imagery thrives in all its bloom.[101] If it is true that, as with post-Romantic poetry, early and mid-Victorian novels often draw on flora in order to hint at sexuality and the body, their focus is definitely more oriented on social themes and narrative functions than on metapoetic speculation. Nevertheless, true though that may be, it is here essential to note that poetry's exclusive use of the flower Trope partly waned in late nineteenth century with the advent of imaginative, proto-Modernist prose, when both narrative and the essayistic genre sought to conform to similar aesthetic ideals to post-Romantic verse. The link between late nineteenth-century writers' obsession with style and their more 'formal' treatment of blossoms is discussed by Amy King, who remarks how in Henry James's novels 'the bloom plot becomes […] its formal subject, rather than that which the novels dramatize'.[102] In light of these considerations, in my discussion of the floral Trope I have examined comparatively few prose works and paid attention mostly to experimental lyrical prose.

[101] See King and Lynn Voskuil, 'The Victorian Novel and Horticulture', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 549-568.
[102] King, p. 10.

5. Varieties of the Flower Trope

Trying to establish a specific literary text or a specific literary-historical moment as the first appearance of the floral Trope is a tremendously hazardous and rather pointless operation, especially since what I term as the floral Trope shared many of its characteristics with previous representations of flowers and was an extremely diverse phenomenon. One may tentatively say that, in English literature, the floral Trope emerged as early as the 1850s, somewhere between Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and *Maud* (1855), Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poetics, Ruskin's theories, and Swinburne's first poems. In addition to the general aesthetic traits which I have outlined above, the main characteristics of the flower Trope may be schematised as follows:

1) Post-Romantic blossoms are often likened to luminous and spectral phenomena, whether fire and flames, different types of artificial and natural illuminations, or aerial and astral apparitions. In his monograph on the role of flowers in nineteenth-century French literature, Philip Knight has rightly linked these metaphors to German Romanticism;[103] similarly, Gaston Bachelard, who has investigated the motif of luminous blossoms from a more general and theoretical perspective, has put his emphasis on Novalis's image of the tree as a flowering flame and discussed how in Romantic and post-Romantic literature 'les fleurs, toutes les fleurs sont des flammes — des flammes qui veulent devenir de la lumière'.[104] Nevertheless, although this motif was indeed frequently seized on and fully worked out by Romantic poets, its

---

[103] Knight, p. 23.
[104] Gaston Bachelard, *La flamme d'une chandelle* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961), p. 70.

origin is probably far more ancient. In this sense, the opening lines of the third Canto of Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) are noteworthy:

> Già l'aura messaggiera erasi desta
> a nunziar che se ne vien l'aurora;
> ella intanto s'adorna, e l'aurea testa
> di rose, colte in paradiso infiora[105]

In this passage Tasso both expands and innovates the Homeric mythical personification of 'ῥοδοδάκτυλος' ('rosy-fingered') Dawn by evoking the rosy hue of the early morning sky through paradisiacal blossoms rather than through the conventional image of the pink fingers of the goddess.

In alignment with Bachelard's and Knight's observations on foreign literatures, the use of blossoms to represent luminous objects is relatively common also in English Romantic poetry, especially in Shelley and in Shelley's antecedent Wordsworth, who envisaged his beloved daisy as a celestial orb ("Yet like a star, with glittering crest, | Self-poised in air thou seem'st to rest").[106] After being codified by Romantic poets and writers, this motif was greatly built on in Victorian literature, where it became even more frequent and sophisticated. Unsurprisingly – given his attention to cloud formations, the appearance of the sky, and colour more in general – this pictorial type of flower images figures largely in Ruskin's works. For instance, in his taxonomy of plants in the second section of *The Queen of the Air* (1869) he likens 'the crimson bars of the tulips in their trim beds' to the 'crimson bars of morning above

---

[105] Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata*, ed. by Lanfranco Caretti (Torino: Einaudi, 1971), p. 75.
[106] See Scarry, 'Imagining Flowers', pp. 111-112.

them',[107] while in his idiosyncratic flower book *Proserpina* (1875-1886) he refers to bushes of whortleberry as 'an Aurora, purple and cloudless, stayed on all the happy hills', and imaginatively describes the intensely-coloured red poppy as 'all silk and flame: a scarlet cup, perfect-edged all round, seen among the wild grass far away, like a burning coal fallen from Heaven's altars'.[108]

This use of the floral Trope is particularly vital in late nineteenth-century literature, where it interacts with literary Impressionism, that widespread aspiration, in much turn-of-the-century poetry and prose, towards 'the record of the impression of a moment', towards the linguistic representation of impermanent objects and momentary moods.[109] In this respect, Oscar Wilde – who was among the first, in England, to experiment with Impressionistic short verse – is indicative. While he still draws on the more traditional analogy between flowers and stars in the children story 'The Selfish Giant', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891) he deploys a more atmospheric (and Decadent) floral image to render the suffocating interior of Sybil Vane's artificially-lit theatre: 'the heat was terribly oppressive, and the huge sunlight flamed like a monstrous dahlia with petals of yellow fire'.[110] Nevertheless, it was poets relatively close to Wilde such as Olive Custance (1874-1944), wife of Wilde's former lover Alfred Douglas, and Arthur Symons (1865-1945), to whom the last chapter of this study is devoted, who honed the Impressionistic use of blossoms.

---

[107] John Ruskin, *The Cestus of Aglaia and The Queen of the Air*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905), p.373.

[108] John Ruskin, *Love's Meinie and Proserpina*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), pp. 367, 253-254.

[109] I quote from Ford Madox Ford's famous definition of Impressionism. See Adam Parkes, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3. For literary Impressionism see also Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambirdge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 89-205.

[110] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 70.

Unsurprisingly, since it aptly captures prismatic light and shimmering shades of colours, such strongly visual and atmospheric representation of blossoms made its way into Imagistic or Imagistic-derived verse like John Gould Fletcher's 'Dawn', a poem included in Amy Lowell's anthology *Some Imagist Poets* (1917): 'Above the east horizon, | The great red flower of the dawn | Opens slowly, petal by petal'.[111]

2) Post-Romantic floral images not only trope ethereal phenomena, but also extremely carnal things. Indeed, in much late nineteenth-century poetry and prose, blossoms often stand symbolically either for the sexualised human body – whether female or, less frequently, male – or for equally eroticised body parts. As with the atmospheric use of the floral Trope, also this aspect of post-Romantic flower imagery follows a long tradition, which in English literature may be traced back at least to Shakespeare's sonnet 99 – where flowers are accused of stealing 'sweet or colour' from various body parts of the speaker's beloved – and Thomas Campion's insouciant lyric 'There is a Garden in Her Face'.[112] By building on this rich metaphorical repertoire, post-Romantic poets and writers – who were inevitably influenced by the cultural debate around the sexualisation of blossoms in Linnaean and Darwinian botany – explored the association between flora and sexuality much further, and often in decidedly more graphic terms. At the end of the first part of Tennyson's masterful dramatic monologue *Maud*, in a section interspersed with flower personifications, the titular girl is invoked as a lush hybrid between a rose and a lily. The symbol of the rose, which is recurrent in Tennyson's poems and often

---

[111] *Some Imagist Poets, 1917*, ed. by Amy Lowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 10.

[112] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 579. See Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics', pp. 680, 690. She rightly argues that the analogy between women and flowers is primeval. See also Jane Desmarais, *Monsters under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), p. 160.

allusive to biographical romance, here emblematises both the speaker's unquenched desire and the girl's otherworldly nature:

> Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,
> Come hither, the dances are done,
> In gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls,
> Queen lily and rose in one.[113]

If in 'Maud' the recourse to flowers in order to express the speaker's libido is still partially tinged with sentimental (albeit very introspective) connotations, forty years later, in the anonymous pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893), blossoms vividly metaphorise the female sexual organs. The narrative, which have been often attributed to Oscar Wilde, describes the clitoris as 'a tiny bud […] a living flower of flesh and blood' which, if stimulated properly, may 'expand its petals and shed forth its ambrosial dew'.[114] Although they are rarely as explicit as *Teleny*, many late nineteenth-century poems and novels draw on flora to represent (and sexualise) female lips, hands, and breasts.

Yet, fin-de-siècle flower images target not only the female body, but also – and possibly even more scandalously – male bodies, a fact which is almost implied in Max Nordau's epochal jeremiad against Decadence, *Degeneration* (1892), where he notices how effete (homosexual) 'degenerates' are morbidly excited by flora.[115] For instance, in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* the protagonist is frequently linked to flowers and, as Carla Maria Gnappi has pointed out, this flowery motif usually

---

[113] *Tennyson*, p. 563. For Tennyson's imagery of the rose see Leonée Ormond, *Alfred Tennyson. A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 64-67. For an attentive reading of Maud see Francis O'Gorman, 'What is Haunting Tennyson's "Maud" (1855)?', *Victorian Poetry*, 48.3 (2010), 293-312.
[114] Syme, p. 26. In general, I am much indebted to Syme's remarkable exploration of the link between blossoms and sex in late nineteenth-century literary culture.
[115] Quoted in Syme, p. 45.

suggests homoerotic undertones.[116] At the very beginning of the book, Lord Henry Wotton – before even meeting Dorian – connotes his painted portrait as a 'young Adonis, who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose leaves', and, even more significantly, likened his picture to 'Narcissus', the young hunter who, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is turned into the homonymous flower after burning out for his own self-love.[117] Indeed, the jonquil – the common name for some of the species of the genus Narcissus – has an important symbolic role in the poem in that the mythical ancestry of the flower emblematises Dorian and his fate: 'Summer followed summer, and the yellow jonquils bloomed and died many times, […] but he was unchanged. No winter marred his face or stained his flower-like bloom'.[118] Wilde frequently connected the jonquil to male beauty, and similar non-heteronormative uses of this blossom, which paralleled the discussion of the myth of Narcissus in contemporary psychology, are in Alfred Douglas's 'Jonquil and Fleur-de-Lys'. In the poem, which is dedicated to Douglas and Wilde's long-time friend Robert Ross, the jonquil personifies a physically-attractive shepherd lad.

3) The luxurious sensuousness of the floral Trope, which captures the plenitude of sexualised bodies, often verges on strangeness. Although partly deriving from indigenous sources, this aspect of English floral Imagery owes much to its French models and counterparts, and inevitably correlates with the much-discussed late nineteenth-century cultural phenomenon of Decadence. In this sense, Barbey d'Aurevilly's enthusiastic review of Baudelaire's collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), where he positively characterises Baudelaire's poetic talent as 'une fleur du mal

---

[116] See Carla Maria Gnappi, 'Beauteous sprays and drooping corollas. Floral imagery in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *RSV Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 12-13.24-25 (2007-2008), 71-87.
[117] Wilde, p. 6. See Gnappi, p. 73.
[118] Wilde, p. 117. Gnappi 73-74

venue dans les serres chaudes d'une Décadence',[119] is indicative in that it was among the first texts to directly associate (exotic) blossoms and glasshouses with the concept of Decadence. (Incidentally, the use of this concept in literary discourse to indicate a cultural, artistic, and moral decline – often associated with over-refinement and sterility – predated Baudelaire of at least thirty years, but it was soon linked to Baudelaire's rather innovative mix of immorality, corruption, and strangeness, those features of his verse that were much idolatrised and expanded by later French poets.) Indeed, references to hothouses apart, Baudelaire himself had somewhat already made the connection between flowers and uncanny singularity. By naming its epoch-making collection 'flowers of evil', he linked indissolubly flora – an age-long metaphor for poetry – both to the avant-garde aesthetic autonomy of his verse and to his rebellious choice of singing licentious and even sadistic subject matter (in his own words, 'L'HORREUR DU MAL').[120] If it was probably in the context of Baudelaire's immediate reception that flowers, and especially rare hothouse species, became a regular attribute of the set of aesthetic traits labelled as Decadence, the poetic celebration of floral strangeness had many antecedents, at least in Early Modern literature – for instance, in several seventeenth-century poems on bizarre tropical flora – and, perhaps most cogently here, in Romantic verse.[121]

Unsurprisingly, since the concept of strangeness is deeply ingrained in his search for an unfamiliar, highly metaphorical poetic expression, Shelley represented various

---

[119] Quoted in Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes I*, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 1194. The passage is also quoted and commented on in Knight, p. 225 (see also pp. 225-231 for Decadent flora). For glasshouses, exotic blossoms, and fin-de-siècle literary culture see Desmarais. For the role of glasshouses in shaping nineteenth-century culture and perceptive cognition see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[120] Baudelaire, p. 194. For Baudelaire's blossoms see Knight, pp. 62-130.

[121] Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics', p. 689.

unusual, visionary plants in his oeuvre and directly deployed the phrase 'strange flowers' in 'Rosalind and Helen': 'Then I heard strange tongues, and saw strange flowers, | And the stars methought grew unlike ours'.[122] Writing in the aftermath of the Romantic tradition, Baudelaire's acknowledged master, Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), used the French equivalent of this phrase as early as the 1830s and dramatized many exotic blossoms and intoxicating Decadent glasshouses both in his poetry and prose.[123] Moreover, if we include in this category also bizarre artificial flowers – a choice which is legitimised by the treatment of flowers in Decadent works such as Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) – one may correlate the queer sensuality of late nineteenth-century flora with the coeval fad for embalmed and fake (silky, papery, or glass) flowers.[124]

Due to this widespread idealisation of strangeness, post-Romantic floral images frequently draw on exotic, rare, toxic, or eerie-looking flowers. Intriguingly, many of the blossoms most favoured by Decadent and Symbolist writers are comprised in Ruskin's self-coined botanical category of the *Draconidae*, a group of serpentine plants like foxgloves and gladioli which he associates with darkness and degeneracy in *The Queen of the Air*.[125] The poet Mark André Raffalovich (1864-1934), whose

---

[122] *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and others (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000), p. 302 (ll. 1201-1202).
[123] For Gautier's flower images see Knight, pp. 53-56; Jean Richer, *Études et recherches sur Théophile Gautier prosateur*, (Paris: Nizet, 1981), pp. 110-118 and Desmarais, pp. 134-135.
[124] Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 8-9.
[125] Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air*, pp. 376-377. For Ruskin on blossoms see Mahood, pp. 147-182 (with particular emphasis on Ruskin's view of 'flowers of evil'); Rachel Teukolsky, 'Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire: Revisioning Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics', *PMLA*, 122.3 (2007), 711-727; Clive Wilmer, ''No such thing as a flower […] no such thing as a man': John Ruskin's response to Darwin', in *Darwin, Tennyson and Their Readers: Explorations in Victorian Literature and Science*, ed. by Valerie Purton (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), pp. 97-108 and Seaton, 'Considering the Lilies'.

scentful flora has been recently studied by Catherine Maxwell,[126] idealised several of these 'dragon-like' blossoms in his poem 'Stramony'. The text, which is included in Raffalovich's collection *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* (1885), revolves around a sophisticated comparison between the speaker's beloved and lethal plants such as the 'hemlock, the 'foxglove', the 'nightshade', and the titular 'stramony'.[127] The tuberose, which is hymned by Raffalovich, is another typically Decadent blossom; its white carnal petals and heady 'animalic' scent fascinated many poets, notably Mary Robinson (1857-1944) who infused this blossom with sentimental autobiographical connotations.[128] However, both tuberoses and foxgloves seem somewhat niche species if compared with the enormous popularity of orchids during the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in the last two decades, when they became omnipresent in Decadent poetry and prose.[129] While Oscar Wilde famously included them in several of his works, the lesser poet Theodore Wratislaw (1871-1933) named an entire collection after them (*Orchids*, 1896), and sung their inspirational 'orchestra of hues' and 'curiously-wrought' shapes in the eponymous poem from this collection.[130]

In conclusion, it is here important to remark that, although they are strictly intertwined, the floral Trope does not overlap completely with Decadence. Even though the concepts of aesthetic self-referentiality and sensual fulfilment are often structural to many decadent works, decadent flower imagery is just one of the

---

[126] Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 182-200. See also Ed Madden, 'Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich', *College Literature*, 24.1 (1997), 11-27.
[127] Mark André Raffalovich, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* (London: David Bogue, 1885), p. 35.
[128] See Maxwell, pp. 182-200.
[129] For orchids see chiefly Kelley, pp. 246-262.
[130] *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Karl Beckson (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1982), p. 269.

various manifestations of post-Romantic floral imagery. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapters, many post-Romantic floral images convey an air of unusual, very stimulating sensuousness without deploying typically decadent motifs such as botanical rarities or toxic blooms.

4) Since plants are, in Scarry's words, simultaneously 'pre-image' and 'afterimage', and occupy the ever-changing space of the non-yet, it is no wonder that blossoms have been linked to metamorphosis since ancient literature. While this is a familiar enough fact, it is undeniable that the metamorphic nature of floral imagery became absolutely fundamental in Romantic and post-Romantic literature, where blossoms are frequently represented as unstable polymorphous objects, often transforming into marine or winged animals. As many of the literary phenomena described above, also this aspect of the floral Trope was determined by larger cultural processes. After 'eighteenth-century experimentalists gathered evidence that some species had traits that resembled species that belonged to other kingdoms',[131] many nineteenth-century scientific theories, partly based on Romantic-inflected organicist ideas, sought to describe the mysterious commingling between plants and animals. Naturalists like the German Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919) and the English Philip Henry Gosse (1810-1888) investigated the polyps, a group of organisms 'having many feet or footlike processes, including octopi, squid, cuttlefish, starfish, jellyfish; anemones, sea pansies, coral', and frequently analogised them to blossoms.[132] These scientific researches into such protean marine flora had much resonance with writers and poets, as Jane Desmarais has recently pointed out. In this respect, it is interesting to note that Gosse was the author of the extremely popular book *The Aquarium: An*

[131] Syme, p. 110.
[132] Syme, p. 117.

Unveiling of the Wonders of the Deep Sea (1854), in which he vividly recorded his explorations of the submarine world and even instructed his readers 'how to build a miniature ocean'.[133] The book, which registers the first appearance of the word 'aquarium' in the language, was the origin of the Victorian and Continental mania for aquariums. A marine equivalent of hothouses and botanical gardens, the aquarium furnished poets and writers with oneiric and mutable shapes to imitate in their works.[134]

Less than a decade after Gosse's popular introduction to the drowned kingdom of the sea, Charles Darwin began to theorise and publish about the animal characteristics of plants. He was especially fascinated by their ability to move and their puzzling carnivorous (in his words, 'insectivorous') habits. Darwin also investigated the polymorphous and often animal-like orchid blossoms, and concluded that the resemblance of these flowers to insects serves to attract their pollinators.[135] As with Darwin, the metamorphic appearance of orchids allured many writers and scientists in the course of the century – to the point that many species were actually named after their similarity to birds or insects.[136] Indeed, the orchid's 'mimetic crosses' between different kingdoms of nature perfectly exemplify a general literary tendency to associate flowers with birds or insects.[137] The cognitive-linguistic origin of this association is somewhat explained by Ruskin, who, in *Proserpina*, connects the Greek word πέτἄλον (leaf as a 'the spread or expanded thing') to πέτομαι signifying 'to fly', 'so that you may think of a bird as spreading its petals to

---

[133] Desmarais, p. 194.
[134] Desmarais, pp. 195, 198-199.
[135] See Kelley, p. 260.
[136] Kelley, pp. 246-247, 261.
[137] Kelley, pp. 247, 7.

the wind'.[138] Drawing on primary perceptual analogies, metaphors combining birds, insects, and flowers pervaded fin-de-siècle literary culture and the visual arts. However, just as the late nineteenth-century cultural hysteria for orchids was the culmination of an interest for the flower which had begun at the end of the previous century, so the metamorphism of orchids had been already sung decades earlier, for example in Charlotte Smith's poem 'Wild Flowers', where we witness how 'the Orchis […] mock the exploring bee or fly's aerial form'.[139]

5) The metamorphism of the flower Trope may be frequently viewed as the manifestation of a constitutive movement of poetic language, a primordial dynamic of the creative process that the floral Trope brings to light and in some cases directly symbolises. The association between poetry and flowers is a time-worn literary commonplace, operating in literary discourse from ancient literature onwards. In this respect, the examples are many and diverse, but it suffices here to remember that the noun 'anthology' (meaning a collection of poems or literary pieces) literally designates a garland of flowers, where each poem is envisaged as a blossom. However, the reworking of this poetic convention in late nineteenth-century and early Modernist literature is often extremely original, and at times even becomes the primary function of floral Imagery. If (literary) language is imagined as a self-sufficient and self-organised force, blossoms may offer the artist the key to solve the inevitable problem of the genesis and (self-)development of such autotelic language, a vexed question at least since Kant's aesthetics, as argued above. Just as post-Romantic metamorphic and (bi)sexualised flowers ever mutate and self-generate,

---

[138] Ruskin, *Proserpina*, p. 231.

[139] Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 191. The poem was first published in the children book *Minor Morals* (1800).

words may autonomously come into existence, blossom, and change. Often symbolised through flower metaphors, the idea of the self-generation and self-development of the poetic word pervades many post-Romantic poetics, and is often symbolised, if not directly thematised, in many post-Romantic works (once again, it could not be otherwise, primarily via floral images). This 'metapoetic' use of blossoms probably peaked in Stéphane Mallarmé's oeuvre, but it persisted well into the twentieth century. In this sense, a passage from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is fully indicative, especially if seen against Woolf's conception of language as expressed in the well-known essay 'Craftmanship' ('word, if properly used, seem able to live for ever', 'They do it without the writer's will; often against his will', 'it is their nature to change').[140]

In one of the numerous epiphanic moments of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay stares at the window where, in the darkness of the evening, the 'candle flames' blaze vividly. The voices of the other characters, the voices outside, gradually lose meaning, as she enters a state where words do not conform to the ordinary, matter-of-fact needs.[141] Not by chance, it is poetry which breaks into and animates her isolation, in particular the verse uttered by her husband, a Victorian ballad redolent of flowers. A quotation from Charles Elton's hitherto unpublished and rather maudlin 'Luriana Lurilee' ('Come out and climb the garden path, | Luriana Lurilee. | The China rose is all abloom and buzzing with the yellow bee') ushers in Mrs. Ramsay poetic revelation: 'The words sounded as if they were floating like flowers on water out there, cut off from them all, as if no one had said them, but they had come into existence of

---

[140] Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 87, 88, 90.
[141] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 119.

themselves'.[142] The poetic (flower) image of the sensual rose in full bloom – possibly pollinated or at least touched by the bee – is here essential. It is this by virtue of this poetic reference to flora and natural fertility (if not natural procreation) that Mrs. Ramsay can finally imagine and perceive words as autonomous and absolutely impersonal beings, aquatic blossom which, like 'music', are capable of 'saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things'.[143]

As it captures the verbal autonomy imaginatively represented by Woolf, the protean floral Trope lends itself, due to its sensuousness, to embody the poetic word, to conceive linguistic creation as a bodily process. In particular, since they often envisage blossoms as sensual self-fertilising (hermaphroditic) creatures, late nineteenth and early twentieth-century flower poetics are in tune with many (post-) Lacanian linguistic theories (which is unsurprising since all these theories largely seized on flower-related poetics and poetry like Mallarmé's). In this sense, because it frequently advocates the maternal to the detriment of the paternal, or at least because it fuses these two principles, one may argue that the poetic energy which flower Imagery symbolises is not far from Julia Kristeva's maternal 'géno-texte' (genotext), 'la base sous-jacente au langage que nous désignerons par le terme de phéno-texte'.[144] In Kristeva's view, the genotext is the textual equivalent of the '*chora* semiotique' – a pre-symbolic, pre-paternal (and thus impersonal), semiotic space of drives – and represents the underlying dynamism of language, the mutable and ever-combining totality of its infinite possibilities, a hidden yet continuous process which

[142] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 120.
[143] Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 120.
[144] Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique. L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), p. 84.

may manifest in literature mainly through phonetic and rhythmic phenomena.[145] Although Kristeva seems to presuppose that the semiotic *chora* may be regained, re-experienced solely in highly experimental literary works like Joyce's and Mallarmé's (both of which, intriguingly, are very rich in blossoms),[146] the flower Trope may equally access the semiotic space in that the it symbolises it and thus enables us to approach it metaphorically. From this perspective, floral Imagery may be seen as a '*dispositif sémiotique*' in that it provides textual evidence of the genotext, it is 'Témoin du *géno-texte*, marque de son insistance dans le *phéno-texte*'.[147]

The following chapters, each devoted to a specific author, variously deal with the characteristics of the flower Trope. Chapter 1 focuses on Algernon Charles Swinburne, whose ubiquitous flower images are structural to his oeuvre and may be viewed as the apotheosis of Victorian floral poetics. Analogously, Arthur Symons, one of the most consummate fin-de-siècle and early Modernist practitioners of the floral Trope, is examined in Chapter 3. Chapter 2 functions as an interlude and provides a first exploration of Pater's floral images by the lens of their pivotal role in shaping the conception of landscape expressed in three of his short stories.

---

[145] Kristeva, pp. 22-26, 83-84.
[146] Kristeva, p. 85.
[147] Kristeva, p. 207.

CHAPTER 1

Blooming Mythopoeia, Blossoming Words, Flower-like Bodies: Swinburne's Floral Imagery

In his letter of 21 March 1866 to John Ruskin, the English poet and critic Algernon Charles Swinburne expressed his special love for flowers in rather lyrical tones. Replying to Ruskin's negative assessment of his controversial poem 'Félise', published in his scandalous collection *Poems and Ballads* later that year, and in particular to a comment on the rhyme in lines 91 and 93, Swinburne remarks: 'As to the flowers and hours, they rhyme naturally, being the sweetest and most transient things that exist — when they *are* sweet'.[1] Indeed, we find traces of this attachment to flowers, this floral sweetness as it were, in several of the poet's letters, which contain a reference not only to imaginary flowers but also to actual ones. Swinburne often mentions real plants in his correspondence, focusing especially on wildflowers and common garden blossoms that he admired at home, in his neighbourhood or during his travels.[2] Yet, as suggested by the comparison between flowers and time — one of the central subjects of his production —, flowers also figure large in his poetry and prose, a fact that has been occasionally noticed by critics and readers. Commenting on the first series of *Poems and Ballads* in the wake of its turbulent immediate reception, William Michael Rossetti included the nouns 'flowers' and 'breast-flowers' among Swinburne's words of choice – a selection which comprises also 'blood', 'sea',

[1] *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-62), I, p. 160.
[2] See, for instance, *The Swinburne Letters*, V, p. 70; VI, pp. 58-59, 79. See also Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2017), pp. 101-103.

'fire', 'lips' and 'breast' – and rightly pointed out that Swinburne draws very rarely on 'the names of particular flowers'.[3] About thirty years later, the cosmopolitan critic and writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) introduced his Japanese students to Swinburne by singling out his mastery 'in enthusiastic celebration of the beauties of sky and sea […], of sound and perfume and', it could not have been otherwise, of 'blossoming'.[4] More recently, Jerome McGann, one of the key figures in the late twentieth-century Swinburne revival, has noticed the omnipresence of blossoms in Swinburne's works, while, in her study of Swinburne's style, which is possibly the latest monograph on the poet, Laura Kilbride has aptly chosen 'flowers' and the compound 'flower-soft' as examples of Swinburne's most recurrent words.[5]

Already structural to Swinburne's early poems, flower images infuse his entire oeuvre, becoming even more frequent and significant in the later works. As we shall see below, Swinburne's flowers epitomise his view of nature and the poetic 'I', represent his much desired merging of the spiritual and the physical, and emblematise his conceptions of the divine and of verse, thus functioning as a symbol of his entire production. Because of their vast range of poetic meanings, these blossoms, which may be seen as the culmination of the use of flower imagery in Victorian poetry, blazed the trail for modern flower poetics in English literature and culture.

1. Swinburne's Floral Species: Botany, Typology, and Atypicality

[3] Quoted in Laura McCormick Kilbride, *Swinburne's Style: An Experiment in Verse History* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018), p. 90. For Rossetti's text see *Swinburne: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by C. K. Hyder (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 58.
[4] Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 86.
[5] Kilbride, p. 12.

Although extremely varied, Swinburne's flower images, if considered from a formal point of view, may be roughly grouped into two (overlapping) categories. The first group of images is characterized by the way it draws on nouns indicating a particular species or genus of flowers (lily and rose, for example, instead of their hypernym 'flower', the lexical base of the second and more peculiar kind of Swinburne's flower tropes) and by its bond with the floral symbolism(s) that held sway in the Victorian age. As with many other Victorian poetical depictions of flowers, one may say that these images originally combine two well-known aspects of the representation of nature in the poetry of the time, its unprecedented attention to detail and its symbolic — at times almost typological — dimension.[6] Variously understood as the product of a pervasive 'aesthetic of particularity', the closely descriptive passages of much Victorian poetry include flowers among some of their most recurrent subjects, as the popularity of botanical science grew throughout the century. Somewhat ironically, this kind of extreme realism leaves some traces even in Swinburne, a poet who has been so often chastised for his confusing vagueness. Although it is not concerned with minute observation as some passages in other contemporary poets, Swinburne's verse is able to zoom in on natural objects and describe them with relative precision. In addition to this concern with detail, another striking feature of the poet's blossoms is their subtle engagement with the various

[6] See Carol T. Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975) and, for Victorian typology, Lothar Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and 'Fin de Siècle'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 1-82. For a general discussion of flowers and nature in Victorian literature, and for further bibliographical references, see my Introduction.

floral symbolisms and languages of flowers that were in vogue at the time.[7] Inevitably engaged in dialogue with this broad cultural phenomenon, Swinburne's flower imagery deals with it rather freely and shies away from pure typology either by playing on the meanings traditionally assigned to flowers or, at least in one notable case, by giving symbolic value to species that were absent from the conventional repertoire.

'The Garden of Proserpine', one of the most anthologized pieces from Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866), offers a remarkable example of the poet's ability to merge quasi-realistic description with strong symbolic overtones and of the way he refashioned a long-established floral iconography. In the fourth stanza of the text, the garden of the goddess is sketched through the enumeration of different plants, of which only one — the narcotic poppy — thrives in her dreamy realm:

> No growth of moor or coppice,
> No heather-flower or vine,
> But bloomless buds of poppies,
> Green grapes of Proserpine,
> Pale beds of blowing rushes
> Where no leaf blooms or blushes
> Save this whereout she crushes
> For dead men deadly wine.[8]

The most popular language-of-flowers books of the century read the poppy as an emblem of consolation, oblivion, repose and sleep.[9] Swinburne deploys the flower to evoke these states — along with the other common association of the blossom with

---

[7] For Victorian floral symbolism see Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995). See Introduction.
[8] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 137.
[9] See for instance Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 188-189.

death — in the closing stanza of 'A Ballad of Death', where poppies are arranged with marigold and 'sheaves of brier' as a votive offering to a personified Death.[10] If it is true that in 'The Garden of Proserpine' this codified set of meanings is strongly reinforced, the association of the poppy with Proserpina is not equally conventional and should not pass unnoticed. As was pointed out in Swinburne's time by several flower books and dictionaries of classical mythology, the ancient Greeks and Romans usually linked the poppy with primitive abstract deities such as Thanatos, Hypnos and Nyx (the embodiments of death, sleep and night), and with earthbound mother-goddesses such as Demeter (Persephone's mother), whose accidental ingestion of the flower interrupted her period of fasting subsequent to the rape of her daughter.[11] While it is somewhat obliquely connected with Proserpina (Persephone) in Ovid's *Fasti* – where it is rapidly listed among the blossoms that grew in the verdant spot where she was kidnapped by Pluto – the flower is more explicitly associated with the goddess in an important literary source for Swinburne's poem.[12] In the seventh canto of the second book of Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, the 'Dead sleeping Poppy' is included among the deadly herbs that grows in the 'Garden of Proserpina', an area visited by the hero Guyon in the Cave of Mammon.[13] Spenser's mention of the poppy — to my knowledge, the only example, in English literature, of the flower as an attribute of Proserpina before Swinburne's poem — is unusual and probably

[10] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 8.
[11] See Angelo De Gubernatis, *La mythologie des plantes ou Les légendes du règne végétal* (Paris: Reinwald, 1882), II, p. 283 and John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica, or The Language of Sentiments of Flowers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1869), p. 140. See also Lorenzo Fabbri, 'Il papavero da oppio nella cultura e nella religione romana: aspetti simbolici e artistici' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università di Milano, 2014-2015).
[12] Fabbri, pp. 249-255.
[13] Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton and others (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 221. Although she quotes Spenser's passage in her discussion of poppies, the horticultural writer Elizabeth Kent interestingly locates the plant in 'the garden of Mammon', but does not mention Proserpina. See Elizabeth Kent, *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower Garden* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823), p. 296.

influenced by his original reworking of the Greek mysteries of Demeter and Persephone. Since the villains of *The Fairie Queene* often 'parody the mysteries', 'Ceres' benign poppy of oblivion, one of the props of the Eleusinian mysteries', is turned into Mammon's 'malevolent' poppy.[14] Certainly indebted to the infernal garden of *The Fairie Queene*, Swinburne's poppies are also revealing of the unorthodox conception of Greek religion developed in his early works. By elaborating on the Eleusinian mysteries in a much more informed and comprehensive way than Spenser, Swinburne pictures Proserpina as an omnipotent un-Olympian goddess who offers the easeful sleep of death to life-weary humanity and soothes 'dead men' with her sedative 'wine'.[15] In this light, Swinburne's insistence on the poppy, one of the attributes of the earthly Demeter and presumably a ritual object in the deeply felt mysteries of Eleusis, fits in well with his chthonic and maternal representation of Persephone.

As opposed to Spenser's garden, where the poppy is just fleetingly mentioned, 'The Garden of Proserpine' devotes an entire stanza to the flower, focusing on the structure of the poppy plant and the extraction of its lethean juice. By likening the poppy buds to 'grapes', the mythical figuration of the stanza imaginatively represents opium as Proserpina's wine. Widely consumed both as a prescription and as a recreational drug in nineteenth-century England, and frequently featured in Romantic and Victorian literature, opium is obtained from the milky fluid secreted by the unripe seed capsules of *Papaver somniferum*, a species often referred to as 'white poppy' for its glaucous colour. It is unequivocally *this* species that Swinburne

---

[14] Douglas Brooks-Davies, 'mysteries', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* , ed. by A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 486.

[15] See Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 16-17, 56-61.

evokes in the poem: the dull greenish hue of its pods, its 'bloomless buds', is rendered through the choice of the adjectives 'pale' and 'green', whereas the long stems of the plant are deftly compared to 'rushes'. In addition to serving as a description of the poppy and as a topical allusion to opium, the poet's reference to grapes, a traditional symbol of Dionysus, may suggest further mythical undertones. In Orphism, a set of religious practices that were often entwined with Eleusinian mysteries, Persephone is strongly linked with Dionysus, being worshipped either as his sister or his mother. Swinburne's metaphorical merging of poppies and grapes may evoke this mythical bond, and is indicative of the Dionysian dimension of his Hellenism.

Such an innovative representation of the goddess and her hypnotic flora was soon imitated by other poets and writers, such as Walter Pater, whose conception of blossoms we shall examine in the following chapter, and the lesser known poet Dora Greenwell (1821-1882). In the latter's poem 'The Garden of Proserpine' (1869), whose title and date of publication clearly hint at its indebtedness to Swinburne's verse, poppies feature among the blossoms of Proserpine's subterranean land, and their symbolic undertone contributes to expressing a rather Swinburnean faith in the inextricable union of desire and anguish.[16] As pointed out by Fabienne Moine, in Greenwell's poem, as in Swinburne's before it, the meaning of Persephone's mythical blossoms – which equates pleasure and pain – undermines traditional (and often saccharine) floral symbolisms.[17] Significantly, Swinburne's verse left traces also on Greenwell's second poem on the myth of Persephone, the later 'Demeter and Cora',

---

[16] Fabienne Moine, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Farnahm and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), p. 109.
[17] Moine, pp. 108-110.

published in 1876. The poem's attention to the goddess's exotic infernal flowers and their glowing in 'a torch-like flame' is a chromatic detail which, as we shall see below, is typical of Swinburne's most visionary flora.[18]

'The Sundew', a masterful example of proto-Decadent curiosity, displays Swinburne's attention to botanical detail perhaps at its most accomplished. The first strophe of the poem immediately introduces us to the bizarre plant alluded to in the title:

> A little marsh-plant, yellow green,
> And pricked at lip with tender red.
> Tread close, and either way you tread
> Some faint black water jets between
> Lest you should bruise the curious head.[19]

The sundew (or dew plant) is the common name for *Drosera rotundifolia*, a carnivorous plant that is endemic to England and grows especially in swampy areas (here represented by the 'black water' which engirdles the 'marsh-flower'). Much discussed in the debate about the insectivorous plants that propelled many botanical publications in England from the early 1870s, the hybrid nature of the sundew is captured by Swinburne's account of its eerie shape.[20] The 'yellow green' leaves of the plant are dotted ('pricked') in the margin ('at lip') of their rounded upper part with 'tender red' organs, the soft and mobile filaments which compose its sticky traps. (It is tempting to think that Swinburne's peculiar use of 'pricked' might also retain the obsolete meaning of 'pointed' and 'stingy', the sense of the adjective as an archaic

---

[18] Moine, pp. 108-109.
[19] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 148.
[20] See Jonathan Smith, 'Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne's "The Sundew" and Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants*', *Victorian Poetry* 41. 1 (2003), 131-50.

derivative of the noun 'prick'.)[21] As noticed by Jonathan Smith, the second line of the text begins to 'anthropomorphize' the sundew, thus stressing the animal qualities of the plant that were so disturbing to many of Swinburne's philistine contemporaries, and at the same time so attractive to the late Romantics and the Decadents-[22] The first stanza conjures up the underlying meaning of 'lip' as a body part and morphs each trap into a 'curious head', a semantic shift that culminates in the phrase 'red-lipped mouth' of the penultimate strophe. Indeed, the fleshy mouth of the 'flower', a strongly womanised, if not sexualised, particular, enshrines the mysterious identity of the speaker's beloved:

> O red-lipped mouth of marsh-flower,
> I have a secret halved with thee.
> The name that is love's name to me
> Thou knowest, and the face of her[23]

The sundew, a species that was not usually included in sentimental flower books, assumes an individual and therefore puzzling set of romantic connotations by virtue of its zoomorphic erotic features.[24] In this sense, the poem's morphing of the sundew's tentacles into a mouth is reminiscent of many other examples of metaphorical association between plants (or flowers) and humanoid mouths in Swinburne's works. Although it was already fairly conventional in his times, this metaphor was creatively reworked by Swinburne and often built on in the direction of sexualising either its target or its source. For instance, in the sixth chapter of the

[21] See the *OED* entry for 'pricked', adj.2.
[22] See Smith, p. 133.
[23] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 149.
[24] The dew-plant features in only one of the five flower lists combined in Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, pp. 176-77.

unfinished early narrative *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, in a sequence that interestingly resembles both Swinburne's 'Laus Veneris' and the famous passage on Albertine's sleeping body in Marcel Proust's *La Prisonnière*, the protagonist contemplates her lover Lucrezia Borgia while she sleeps and likens her quivering mouth to 'a red flower that is rained upon'.[25]

In a few poems from a later collection, *A century of Roundels* (1883), Swinburne openly plays on codified floral symbolism by exploiting the idiomaticalness of the names of the flowers. Each poem in the elegant diptych 'Flower-Pieces', a critically neglected display of bravura, focuses on a blossom whose name is formed with the noun 'love' followed by a verb or prepositional phrase. The poet deploys the linguistic richness of these names, which are representative of a much-debated cluster of words 'which appear to be derived directly from phrases'.[26] Instead of reading the names of these flowers as a single lexical item, Swinburne's verse suggests that we should also, and first, interpret them as regular phrases or clauses. By breaking down the 'phrasal word' into its constituents, the text draws on the highly figurative language that lies behind the word formation of the names of the blossoms. In the poems, the noun 'love', contained in the names of the plants, is personified into the pagan god Eros and serves either as the subject of a verb or as

---

[25] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Collected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 449

[26] Laurie Bauer, *Compounds and Compounding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 50. A similar strategy is employed at least twice by Christina Rossetti. She plays on the popular name of the wild pansy in the poem 'Heartsease in my garden bed', collected in *Sing-Song: a Nursery Rhyme Book* (1872 [1871]), but presumably written between 1868 and 1870. In the poem the speaker confesses that 'Heartsease blossoms in my heart' when her 'sweet William comes to call'. See Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by Simon Humphries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 200. Both heartsease and love-lies-bleeding – two blossoms sung by Swinburne in *A Century of Roundels* – are punned on in the poem dated 'June 6' in Rossetti's prosimetrum *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885). While the date of composition of the earlier poem seems to suggest that Rossetti may have influenced Swinburne's later use of the compound names of flowers, the year of publication of 'June 6' and Rossetti's choice of the roundel form undoubtedly point to Swinburne's model.

the head of a noun phrase. Because of its link with the etymology of their names, the meaning attributed to these plants in sentimental flower literature is also put into play, and the traditional association of flowers with romance is explored in new and creative ways. Moreover, the ambiguity inherent in the names of the flowers chimes nicely with the stanzaic pattern of the poems. The roundel, a fixed form developed by Swinburne himself, consists of three stanzas of respectively four, three and four lines, with a string of words from the opening line repeated as a refrain in the fourth and last lines. Within this metrical constraint, the double reading of the names of the blossoms provides witty variations on the meaning of the refrain and thus fosters 'the dialectic of sameness with difference' which informs the collection.[27]

The first poem of the diptych, 'Love Lies Bleeding', draw its title from the common name for a species of amaranth (*Amaranthus caudatus*) which in Swinburne's time was 'commonly reared for the sake of its long, tail-like, pendent masses of crimson flowers'.[28] The opening two lines sketch the scene: 'Love lies bleeding in the bed whereover | Roses lean with smiling mouths or pleading'.[29] Following the iconographical and poetical commonplace of the wounded Cupid (see the adjective 'sore wounded' in line 8), Love 'lies' losing blood in a (flower?)bed circumscribed by feminised and animated roses. (The presence of the roses may not be by chance: according to the myth, to quote from Robert Herrick's translation of *Anacreontea* 35,

---

[27] Herbert F. Tucker, 'What Goes Around: Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels*', in *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* , ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 130.
[28] *Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants*, ed. by Jane Loudon and others (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1880), p. 1080.
[29] *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904), V, p. 166. Further volume and page references appear in parentheses.

Cupid was stung by a bee 'as he laye amonge | Roses'.)[30] The syntactical structure of the first three words of the first and third lines ('Love lies bleeding' and 'Earth lies laughing') is apparently identical, which urges us to read the name of the flower as a main clause. However, if we consider the name of the plant as a single word and ignore the absence of a main verb, we may also interpret these lines as depicting a bush of love-lies-bleeding in a flowerbed bordered by roses. The second stanza, here as in the other poem from 'Flower-Pieces', captures one of Cupid's physical characteristics by alluding to the colour and the structure of the flower: 'Stately shine his purple plumes, exceeding |Pride of princes' (V, p. 166). We thus witness the splendid and shining 'purple plumes' of the winged deity, an imaginative analogue of the feathery bloom of the amaranth (notice how the possessive 'his' in line 5 triggers the personification). In language-of-flowers books love-lies-bleeding is conventionally associated with hopelessness, a condition that is perfectly rendered by the emblematic closing of the poem. Love can 'scarce recover | Strength and spirit again' and lies on the ground while Hope and Joy, unreachable, 'hover' over him (V, p. 166).[31]

The love-in-a-mist (*Nigella damascena*), a plant of the buttercup family with 'pale blue flowers being surrounded by a mist of leaves', is the subject of the second poem:[32]

> Light love in a mist, by the midsummer moon misguided,
> Scarce seen in the twilight garden if gloom insist,

[30] *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. by Tom Cain and Ruth Connoly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II, p. 180.

[31] See Ingram, p. 359. Sea also Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers, or Language of Flora* (London: Tilt, 1836), p. 183 for another common meaning of the flower. Since the amaranth – as a *genus* – has been traditionally read as a symbol of immortality, 'love and friendship are adorned with amaranth'.

[32] Jane Loudon, *Ladies' Flower Garden, or Ornamental Annuals* (London: William Smith, 1840), p. 10.

> Seems vainly to seek for a star whose gleam has derided
> Light love in a mist.
>
> All day in the sun, when the breezes do all they list,
> His soft blue raiment of cloudlike blossom abided
> Unrent and unwithered of winds and of rays that kissed.
>
> Blithe-hearted or sad, as the cloud or the sun subsided,
> Love smiled in the flower with a meaning whereof none wist
> Save two that beheld, as a gleam that before them glided,
> Light love in a mist (V, pp. 166-167).

In the first stanza, the delicate Love, misdirected ('misguided') by the 'midsummer moon', has lost himself in a misty and gloomy garden at night and 'vainly' hopes to find his way with the aid of the mischievous stars. As in the previous poem, the same strophe may also be read as representing the flower instead of the anthropomorphic god. Spoilt (another meaning of 'misguided') by the moonlight and dimmed by the darkness, the colour of the fragile-looking ('light') love-in-a-mist will never shine in the starlight as it did 'All day in the sun'. The coloristic detail of the flower is morphed, in the second stanza, into Love's blue clothing, described both as smooth and hazy blue (either meaning is conveyed by Swinburne's ambiguous use of 'soft'). The personification, here triggered by the possessive 'his' as in the previous poem, is nevertheless immediately questioned by the postmodification 'of cloudlike blossom', which betrays the vegetable nature of the referent and playfully unveils the rhetorical strategy of the text. Indeed, the actual flower is unequivocally evoked in the text's last and convoluted stanza. Perhaps hinting at many nineteenth-century illustrations of babies emerging from flowers, the poem shows Love smiling enigmatically out of

the love-in-a-mist, an apparition which is suddenly spotted by two future lovers.[33] The reference to a 'meaning' associated with the blossom patently alludes to the language of flowers, with the poem playing extensively with one of the conventional meanings of the nigella. Also known as 'love in a puzzle' in flower books, the love-in-a-mist was read as symbol of perplexity, a feeling that is marvellously emblematised by the figuration of the first stanza.[34]

Swinburne draws on the symbolic quality of the names of the flowers also in 'A Flower-Piece by Fantin', a roundel which focuses on a still life by the French artist Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904). Contemplating the glass vase of *Viola tricolor* that is depicted in the picture, the speaker plays 'on the two different meanings assigned to the flower'.[35] Traditionally referred to as both heartsease and wild pansy, the plant denotes two rather different moods – relief and pensiveness –, both of which are channelled by Swinburne in the poem.[36] His attention to horticultural detail, certainly stimulated by Fantin-Latour's painting, is noteworthy in the opening line of the last stanza ('Deep flowers, with lustre and darkness fraught', V, p. 177), where

---

[33] For these representations see Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-siècle Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), p. 8. Syme mentions a 'a mid-century Valentine' that 'uses a blossom-womb to suggest the birth of Love'. See also Seaton, p. 106 for a floral emblem with Cupid. The association between flowers and babies is extremely common in Swinburne's late poetry. See, for instance, 'In a Garden', included in *Poems and Ballads, Third Series* (1889), and 'In a Rosary', which forms part of *A Channel Passage and Other Poems* (1904). For the latter as a source for the rose garden in T. S. Eliot's 'Burn Norton' see Catherine Maxwell, 'Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Swinburne's "A Rosary"', *The Explicator*, 52.2 (1994), 101-104.

[34] Ingram, p. 359. See also Henry Phillips, *Floral Emblems* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1825), pp. 132-33. Phillips explains the other common meaning of the flower. 'Love in a Puzzle' is 'a puzzle which embarrasses all who fall into it'.

[35] Catherine Maxwell, 'In the Artist's Studio', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 735 (see also p. 736 for an analysis of the poem).

[36] Phillips, p. 302.

the adjective 'deep' suggests the strikingly intense colour of the wild pansy, whereas 'lustre' and 'darkness' allude to its various and often contrasting shades[37].

2. Swinburne's Visionary Flora and the Flowers of Snow

The second kind of Swinburne's floral imagery is far less varied, but possibly even more imaginative. A recurring trope throughout his production, these images are, at their simplest level, either compounds of the word 'flower' or analogous noun phrases having 'flower' as the head and an of-phrase as the postmodification. In both cases, the modifying noun — drawn from the semantic field of natural elements — indicates the unusual material of which the blossom is made. If analysed as metaphors, these images use flowers to explain a protean elemental state. Depicting strange flowery configurations of natural forces, they combine concreteness and ephemerality, thus embodying the fusion of 'sense' and 'spirit', one of the poet's psychophysical and aesthetic ideals. As Swinburne said of Victor Hugo's artistic genius, that he compared to a majestic storm in the Channel, this imagery is at once 'physical, as it touched the nerves with a more vivid passion or pleasure than music or wine' and 'spiritual, as it exalted the spirit with the senses and above them to the very summit of vision and delight'.[38] A post-Romantic blending of imagination and sensual experience, these elemental flowers stand out for their subjective and

[37] See Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers, or Language of Flora*, p. 317. Other remarkable examples of this first group of Swinburne's flower images are 'Relics' and 'The Tear of the roses, both collected in *Poems and Ballads, Second Series*; 'A Moss Rose', in *Astrophel and Other Poems* (1894); and 'Hawthorn Tide', in *A Channel Passage and Other Poems*.

[38] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 385. The essay was first published in the *Spectator* in 1869. For Swinburne's 'sense' and 'spirit', see Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, 'Knowledge and Sense Experience in Swinburne's Late Poetry', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspective on the Mature Work*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), p. 12 and Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 91.

therefore mythopoeic character. However, although relatively uninfluenced by floral symbolisms, they may overlap with actual species of plants, a possibility that is carefully exploited by the poet. Such floral images, which were formative for many of Swinburne's contemporaries and for later authors, symbolise a particular conception of nature and the poetic 'I', of vision and perception – and thereby perfectly emblematise the most revolutionary aspects of Swinburne's poetics.

With the exception of this blossom, Swinburne's most frequent flower images of this type appear in 'Love at Sea', a love lyric collected in *Poems and Ballads*.[39] In the text, Swinburne's rewriting of Théophile Gautier's poem 'Barcarolle', the speaker asks to his beloved where she would like to travel, the three flowers indicating some of the possible destinations:

> Where shall we land you, sweet?
> On fields of strange men's feet,
> Or fields near home?
> Or where the fire-flowers blow,
> Or where the flowers of snow
> Or flowers of foam?[40]

Gautier's poem, included in his *La comédie de la mort* (1838), is much richer in exotic toponyms:

> Est-ce dans la Baltique?
> Sur la mer Pacifique,
> Dans l'île de Java?

[39] A significant and recurring compound that is not included in 'Love at Sea' is 'breast-flower', which represents the bosom as a flower. Although not properly elemental, it is still linked to sensual and bodily experience. See for example its use in the poem 'Fragoletta', included in *Poems an Ballads First Series*, and in the unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon*: 'He kissed her down by her breast-flowers red' (Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 458).

[40] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 145.

Ou bien dans la Norvège,
Cueillir la fleur de neige,
Ou la fleur d'Angsoka?[41]

In Swinburne's poetry the phrase 'flowers of snow' – that here translates the French 'la fleur de neige' – and its equivalent compound 'snow-flower' do not exclusively designate a blossom composed of snow, but may also be understood as a real flower, the snowdrop. The common name for the genus *Galanthus* and especially for *Galanthus nivalis*, the snowdrop is one of the first flowers of the year to bloom, at times even piercing the snow-cover on the ground (as indicated by its French name, *perce-neige*). Swinburne evokes this early flowering in 'A Vision of Spring in Winter', a lyric collected in *Poems and Ballads Second Series* (1878) and inspired by the landscape of the Isle of Wight. The arrival of spring, a traditional subject matter, is symbolised by the 'Sweet foot of spring that with her footfall sows | Late snowlike flowery leavings of the snows'.[42] The image is extremely ambiguous in that it is unclear whether the personified season 'sows' fields covered by flower-like traces of snow or, more presumably, a carpet of snowdrops finally defrosted. Conversely, the flower of snow blooms at its most visionary in the second canto of *Tristram of Lyonesse* (1882), Swinburne's own lyricised version of the Arthurian narrative, in the scene when Tristram and Iseult sleep in a bower after consummating their love. The narrator, describing the glittering 'butterflies' – possibly glow-worms – which hover on Iseult's exhausted body, compares their fleeting whiteness to snow-flowers:

White as the sparkle of snow-flowers in the sun
Ere with his breath they lie at noon undone

[41] Théophile Gautier, *La comédie de la mort* (Paris: Desessart, 1838), p. 309.
[42] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 172.

> Whose kiss devours their tender beauty, and leaves
> But raindrops on the grass and sere thin leaves
> That were engraven with traceries of the snow
> Flowerwise ere any flower of earth's would blow.[43]

As opposed to 'A Vision of Spring in Winter', these lines unequivocally depict elaborate snowflakes that momentarily adorn the grass before melting in the sun. Here the flowers of snow anticipate the growth of all snowdrops. As has been pointed out by John Reed, the flowers of *Tristram of Lyonesse* function as symbols both of fleetingness and of love (which may defeat this temporariness), and are often linked with fire, foam and, as in this passage, with snow.[44] Frozen yet flaky, terribly white for an instant and then forever colourless, these flowers blend tactile and visible qualities, providing a lyric equivalent of what Michelangelo's legendary statue of snow may have symbolised for Pater, an 'etherealising of pure form'.[45]

Although greatly enriched by Swinburne's oeuvre, metaphors involving snow and blossoms were already a well-established commonplace in English poetry, at least from the second half of the eighteenth century. I will give only a few examples. The poet Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), who was interested in Linnaean botany, deploys this imagery in the opening lines of 'To the Snowdrop', which imaginatively sketches the drooping flowers of *Galanthus nivalis* 'Like pendent flakes of vegetating snow, | The early herald of the infant year', and in 'Flora', where the blooming hawthorn is

---

[43] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 241. For this scene of the poem see Margot K. Louis, 'Erotic Figuration in Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse,* Canto 2: The Vanishing Knight and the Drift of Butterflies', *Victorian Poetry,* 47.4 (2009), 647-59; Yisrael Levin, 'Solar Erotica: Swinburne's Myth of Creation', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World*, ed. by Levin, p. 61.
[44] See John R. Reed, 'Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*: The Poet-Lover's Song of Love', *Victorian Poetry* 4.2 (1966), 104-07.
[45] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 39. See Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 37-39.

evoked through the quasi-horticultural phrase 'snow of blossoms'[46]. In the third section of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem 'The Sensitive Plant', an important antecedent to Swinburne's visionary treatment of nature, the rose petals that falls and covers the 'turf and the moss' of a dying untended garden are vividly likened to 'flakes of crimson snow'.[47] In this regard, we should also mention many Victorian poems, such as Robert Browning's 'Women and Roses', Christina Rossetti's 'A rose has thorns as well as honey' (with its tongue-in-cheek comparison between snow and snowdrops), as well as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's famous monologue 'Jenny', where 'snow-white lilies' that 'are spread | Like winter on the garden bed' betoken the titular prostitute's spoilt innocence.[48]

3. The Flowers of Fire

As suggested by Swinburne himself in the roundel 'Eros' – where Love is likened to 'fire or flowers or snows' –, fire is a common constituent of the poet's most visionary blossoms (V, p. 171). In 'Love at Sea', as we have seen, the compound 'fire-flowers'

---

[46] Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 187, 285. See Rosalind Powell, 'Poetry, Linnaeus, Analogy, and Taxonomy: Botanical Naming and Categorization in Erasmus Darwin and Charlotte Smith', *Philological Quarterly*, 95.1 (2016), 101-24.

[47] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1819-1820*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), p. 309. For 'The Sensitive Plant' see Richard Cronin, '*The Sensitive Plant* and the Poetry of Irresponsibility', in *The Neglected Shelley*, ed. by Alan M. Weinberg and Tymothy Webb (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 199-214; Jerrold. E. Hogle, 'Visionary Rhyme: The Sensitive-Plant *and* The Witch of Atlas', in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 360-374. For a discussion of the relationship between Shelley and Swinburne see Terry L. Meyers, 'Shelley's Influence on *Atalanta in Calydon*', *Victorian Poetry*, 14.2 (1976), 150-154; Terry L. Meyers, 'Swinburne, Shelley, and *Songs Before Sunrise*', in *The Whole Music of Passion*, ed. by Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 40-51 and Michael O'Neill, ''Stars Caught in my Branches': Swinburne and Shelley', in *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 103-118.

[48] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 63.

renders the French ‘la fleur d’Angsoka’, a rather puzzling phrase that Gautier probably borrowed from Francisque Michel’s *Choix de poésies orientales* (1830), a successful book of translations of Eastern poetry.[49] In Michel’s selection, the introduction to the poem *Mort de Keni Tambouham*, which mentions the flower in its second line, identifies the plant with precision: ‘C’est l’*angsoka* (*pavetta indica*), que Rumphius, dans son *Herbarium amboinense*, appelle *flamma sylvarum peregrina*, à cause du rouge éclatant de ses longs calices’.[50] The passage is an almost literal translation of the description of the flower in William Marsden’s *The History of Sumatra* (3rd edn 1811): ‘The *añgsūka*, or *buñga jarum-jarum* (pavetta indica), obtained from Rumphius, on account of the glowing red colour of its long calices, the name of flamma sylvarum peregrina’.[51] The information provided by Marsden, a British orientalist and scholar of the Malay language, is sufficient to explain Swinburne’s transformation of ‘la fleur d’Angsoka’ into the fire-flower. A dyed-in-the-wool Francophile, Swinburne seemed to have known Michel’s selection of medieval poems about Tristram, and was probably familiar both with the use of the flower in *Choix de poésies orientales* and with its relative fortune in contemporary French poetry.[52] Mentioned by Gautier in many other texts – including *Mademoiselle du Maupin* (1835), a great favourite of Swinburne –, the *angsoka* must have captivated Swinburne with its fiery aspect rather than with its unusual name.[53] The poet might have linked the *flamma sylvarum*, as the plant was called by the seventeenth-century botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius, with a more imaginative blossom evoked by

---

[49] See Jean Richer, *Études et recherches sur Théophile Gautier prosateur* (Paris: Nizet, 1981), pp. 110-111.
[50] Richer, p. 111.
[51] William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (London: J. McCreery, 1811), p. 105.
[52] See Francis Jacques Sypher, ‘Swinburne and Wagner’, *Victorian Poetry*, 9.1/2 (1971), 177.
[53] For the occurrences of the phrase in Gautier’s oeuvre see Richer, pp. 111-113.

Victor Hugo, one of the writers most celebrated and admired by Swinburne. In the third stanza of Hugo's poem 'Mille chemins, un seul but', included in *Les rayons et les ombres* (1840) and celebrating universal love as a path to God, we see a shepherd waiting for the morning under the night sky.[54] The dawn will be announced by the vanishing of a blazing star, which the speaker likens to a corolla of fire on an invisible stalk (a 'fleur de feu'):

> Le pâtre attend sous le ciel bleu
> L'heure où son étoile paisible
> Va s'épanouir, fleur de feu,
> Au bout d'une tige invisible.[55]

While Swinburne's 'fire-flowers' were certainly influenced by the *flamma sylvarum* and especially by Hugo's flowery stars, Marsden's identification of the flower as *Pavetta indica*, a hypothesis shared by Kenneth Heynes in his note to 'Love at Sea', is debatable.[56] Unlike the fiery red colour of the *angsoka*, the flowers of *Pavetta indica*, a species of the genus *Pavetta* that grows in India and Sri Lanka, are white, a feature observed by many nineteenth-century botanical publications such as *The Botanical Register* and the *Herbier général de l'amateur*.[57] As pointed out in the *Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants*, Pavetta is a 'small genus nearly related to Ixora, with flowers

---

[54] This source is signalled in Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 359. I am not able to tell whether Hugo was influenced by Michel's translation.
[55] Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. by Gaëtan Picon and Pierre Albouy (Paris: Gallimard, 1964-1974),I (1964), p. 1083.
[56] See Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 359.
[57] *The Botanical Register*, ed. by Sydenham Edwards (London: James Ridgway, 1817), III, f. 198; Jean Loiseleur-Deslongchamps and Mordant de Launat, *Herbier général de l'amateur* (Paris: Audot, 1821), V, f. 331.

usually white, as those of Ixora are red'.[58] Loudon's reference to *Ixora*, a plant with small flowers, usually of a vivid red-orange colour, arranged in dense groups, is telling. The genus *Ixora* belongs to the *Rubiaceae*, the same family of the genus *Pavetta* – with which it has been often confused[59] – and grows in South-East Asia, even in Java (one of the toponyms mentioned in Gautier's *Barcarolle*). The first volume of the influential *The Paxton's Flower Garden* describes some specimens of *Ixora salicifolia* that were exhibited at Chiswick as 'a stove shrub […] from Java' with 'flame-coloured' flowers, an account that dovetails with Swinburne's poetical reworking of the flower.[60] Indeed, Rumphius's *flamma sylvarum* and *flamma sylvarum peregrina* were identified with two species of *Ixora* by William Roxburgh, an accomplished botanist who served as superintendent of the Indian Botanic Garden in Calcutta.[61] While the identification of the traditional *angsoka* flower as a precise species seems to be still uncertain, I think it is safe to assume that Swinburne's flower of fire might boast a member of the genus *Ixora* as its real counterpart.[62]

Rejecting the exotic ancestry of the image — at least, as we shall see, in its more decorative sense —, Swinburne draws on the brightness of the fire-flower to fix

---

[58] *Loudon's Encyclopædia*, p. 100. This distinction is still valid today. See W. D. Hawthorne, 'Six new *Pavetta* (Rubiaceae), including three 'litter-bin' species from the evergreen forests of Western Africa', *Kew Bulletin*, 68.4 (2013), 570.

[59] See Arnaud Mouly and others, 'Phylogeny and classification of the species-rich pantropical showy genus *Ixora* (Rubiaceae-Ixoreae) with indications of geographical monophyletic units and hybrids', *American Journal of Botany*, 96.3 (2009), 686.

[60] John Lindley and Joseph Paxton, *Paxton's Flower Garden* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1850-51), p. 111.

[61] William Roxburgh, *Flora Indica; or Descriptions of Indian Plants* (Calcutta: Thacker, 1832; repr. 1874), III, pp. 126-27. For Roxburgh see Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp. 178-209.

[62] See Waruno Mahdi, *Malay Words and Malay Things: Lexical Souvenirs from an Exotic Archipelago in German Publications before 1700* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), p. 105 for the difficulty in deciphering the Malay term for the flower. A completely different species, the *açoka* or *Jonesia asoca* or *Saraca asoca*, soon overshadowed the *angsoka* in mid and late nineteenth-century French poetry. The *açoka*, a plant connected with Hindu mythology, became so fashionable among poets that Arthur Rimbaud included it in his lyric 'Ce qu'on dit au poète à propos de fleurs'.

otherwordly, spectral and heavenly, bodies. In 'Laus Veneris', one the most discussed texts from *Poems and Ballads*, the birth of Venus from the ebullient water of the sea, a literary *topos* from Hesiod's *Theogony* onward, culminates in the emergence of the goddess as 'the inner flower of fire', the quintessence of a luminous and carnal apparition.[63] By the same token, in Swinburne's uncompleted novel *Lesbia Brandon,* in a nightmarish passage that Randolph Hughes has rightly glossed with reference to Freudian and Jungian symbolism, the planet Venus morphs into a flower that morphs in its turn into a sexed vagina-like mouth: 'He saw the star of Venus, white and flower-like as he had alwa's seen it, turn into a white rose and come down out of heaven, with a reddening centre that grew as it descended liker and liker a living mouth'.[64] The fire flowers are connected with venereal sensuality also in Swinburne's essay 'The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', first published in 1870 after the publication of Rossetti's first book of poetry and then included in *Essays and Studies* (1875). While commenting on the structural interrelation of many of Rossetti's poems with his paintings, and, in particular, on the relation between Rossetti's picture of Helen and his poem 'Troy Town', Swinburne characterises Helen's 'mouth of ardent blossom' as a 'keen red flower-bud of fire'.[65]

While Swinburne deploys the blossom to picture the heated body of the pagan deity in his first collection, in his next book of poetry he draws on it to apostrophize the recently deceased Armand Barbés, a French republican and opponent of the July monarchy. In 'Armand Barbés', a lyric included in *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) and aligned with the political and revolutionary subject matter of the collection, the soul

---

[63] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 21.
[64] *Lesbia Brandon by Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Randolph Hughes (London: The Falcon Press, 1952), p. 97; for Hughes's comments on this passage see pp. 553-555.
[65] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), p. 99.

of the French 'hero' is compared to 'Fire out of heaven', a phenomenon resembling 'a flower of perfect fire'(II, p. 109). Another poem from the same collection, 'Ode on the Insurrection in Candia', represents the massacre of the Greek population as the action of a bloodthirsty blossom whose bloom is toxic to any form of life: 'death, with flame in hand, an open bloodred flower, | Passed, and where it bloomed no bloom of life remained' (II, p. 206).

In addition to Hugo's 'Mille chemins, un seul but', Shelley's 'The Sensitive Plant', with the synaesthesia of the fragrant 'unseen clouds of the dew which lie | Like fire in the flowers', and especially his lyric drama *Prometheus Unbound* are fundamental sources for this atmospheric imagery.[66] In the third act of *Prometheus Unbound*, the Spirit of the Hour gives an account of the journey he made after the fall of Jupiter and Prometheus's reunion with Asia, and tells how his 'coursers' have finally reached their native fields in the sun, where they now pasture astral 'flowers of vegetable fire'.[67]

Swinburne's 'The Lake of Gaube', included in his last collection *A Channel Passage and Other Poems* (1904) and inspired by the poet's swim in the eponymous lake during a tour in the Pyrenees in 1862, is as rich in fiery blossoms as the poet's early works. As with other later poems such as 'The Nympholept' and 'The Palace of Pan' — both infused with metaphors involving sunlight, plants and fire —, the first part of 'The Lake of Gaube' depicts a mysteriously quiet and sunny landscape. The flowers of fire are deployed to picture the gleaming flora and fauna of this solar

---

[66] *The Poems of Shelley 1819-1820*, p. 301. For a strikingly similar passage in *Tristram of Lyonesse* (canto 2) see Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 239: ' and like fire | The lit dews lightened on the leaves'.

[67] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and others (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000), p. 604. Equally visionary tones pervades Swinburne's Tristram of Lyonesse (canto 8): 'For here the flower of fire, the soft hoar bloom | Of springtide olive woods'. See Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 289.

environment: the vivid mountainous flowers and the viscid salamanders that crawl through them on the rocks are represented as 'Flowers dense and keen as midnight stars aflame' and 'living things of light like flames in flower'.[68] This imagery reaches a peak of intensity in the quasi-alchemic detail of the 'scales' of the creatures, likened to 'flowers of hardened light', an expression that is reminiscent of the equally alchemic 'gem-like flame' in Pater's 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873).[69] For this ability to capture impermanent play of light, Swinburne's fire-flowers must be counted among the precursors of a vast range of *fin-de-siècle* figurations of transitional optical phenomena.[70] In his poem 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', first published in *London Nights* (1895), the decadent writer Arthur Symons sketches the artificial illumination of a cabaret, the 'orange-rosy lamps' that tremble over the female dancers, as 'ruddy flowers of flame that burn'.[71] Although extended to represent the nightlife of the modern city – a subject remote from Swinburne's cult of wilderness –, Symons's turn of phrase is distinctly Swinburnean. Indeed, Swinburne himself might have attributed a decadent meaning to these glowing flowers. In 'Ave atque Vale', his elegy to Charles Baudelaire, the poet displays a vast array of flower images to commemorate the author of the flowers of evil, apostrophized as a 'gardener of strange flowers'. In the first strophe, the speaker enumerates various plants, starting with the highly conventional 'rose', 'rue' and

---

[68] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 330. See Meredith B. Raymond, '"The Lake of Gaube": Swinburne's Dive in the Dark and the "Indeterminate Moment"', *Victorian Poetry*, 9.1/2 (1971), 195 and Yisrael Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo: Myth, Faith and Victorian Spirituality* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 130-152.

[69] Pater, p. 120. See Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 80-88.

[70] For these transitional states in Decadent literature see Marion Thain, 'Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 226-228.

[71] Arthur Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017), p. 102. For Symons's blossoms see Chapter 3.

'laurel', in order to select the best floral offering for the French poet. At the end of this catalogue, Baudelaire's favourite blooms are represented as 'half-faded fiery blossoms', sickly fire-flowers whose 'tropic' origin might allude to the exotic ancestry of this family of figurations.[72] The possibility that these votive flowers might involve a reminiscence of the *angsoka* reinforces Patricia Clements's remark that the elegy 'takes pains to associate Baudelaire [...] with what might be described as artificial, over-complex, excessively paradoxical' and even more so Catherine Maxwell's conclusion that Swinburne — by 'implicitly identifying with the simpler natural flowers' — uses the flower imagery to distance himself from Baudelaire's stifling influence.[73] Rather tellingly, the flowers of fire also feature in what is possibly one of the first imitations of Swinburne's elegy to the French poet. As shown by Clements, in the poem 'On Reading Baudelaire's 'Fleurs du Mal'', which was published by the poet Joseph Sykes (under the pseudonym of 'Julio') in his *Poems* (1870), demonic fiery blossoms thrive in the land of 'languid desire' and immorality, a fact which may seem to testify to the proto-Decadent dimension of Swinburne's fire-flowers:

> And worse than these, the fell desire
> To labour in the cause of ill –
> Where flowers of evil glow like fire,
> In circles ever wid'ning still.[74]

Here Julio's reworking of Swinburne's verse appears to cast back an intrinsic aura of wickedness on Swinburne's flaming flora. However, in general, as I have already hinted at above, I agree with Catherine Maxwell that Swinburne prefers, even in his

---

[72] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 165.
[73] See Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 56 and Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 101.
[74] Clements, pp. 66-67.

poetry, wild or 'old-fashioned' garden flowers to exotic, ornamental, and therefore potentially evil blossoms.[75] In this sense, it is indicative that there are neither orchids nor tuberoses in Swinburne's oeuvre – the two flowers that probably were and still are most frequently linked to fin-de-siècle literary culture. Moreover, in Swinburne's verse the pervasive metaphorical flowers that represent natural forces may be generally counted as extremely wild blossoms. Their action may be destructive, but it is rarely immoral – Swinburne celebrates both pain and pleasure on account of their common sensual origin – and hardly amoral in that these blossoms incarnate the intellectual and sensual plenitude which Swinburne's typical speaker seeks to experience. True though that may be, one cannot ignore that, of Swinburne's most visionary blossoms, the fire flowers are those more often tinged with unequivocally decadent, if not sadistic, connotations. This correlation is mainly due to their chromatic affinity with flesh and blood, an aspect of these blossoms that is much indulged in 'Ilicet' from *Poems and Ballads*:

> All round the sad red blossoms smoulder,
> Flowers coloured like the fire, but colder
> […]
> From boy's pierced throat and girl's pierced bosom
> Drips, reddening round the blood-red blossom,
> The slow delicious bright soft blood,
> Bathing the spices and the pyre,
> Bathing the flowers and fallen fire,
> Bathing the blossom by the bud.[76]

As with the snow-flowers, one may find several images involving fire and flowers in Swinburne's contemporary poets. I shall limit myself to a few examples, all taken

---

[75] Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 101.
[76] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 63.

from authors well-known to Swinburne and focused on the same real plant. In Alfred Tennyson's early poem 'Oenone', inspired, as Swinburne's 'The Lake of Gaube', by the poet's visit to the Pyrenees, the crocus is likened to fire due to its deep yellow colour and, apparently, the form of its petals ('the crocus brake like fire').[77] A similar comparison is also in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet 'Barren Spring', where it is paired with a pun on the snowdrop: 'this crocus is a withering flame; | This snowdrop, snow'.[78] These images, although carefully-handled, are not as visionary as Swinburne's most intricate figurations. While in these two poems the flowers are unequivocally the target of the metaphor, in Swinburne they are often the source. It is in the verse of the Spasmodic poet Sidney Dobell, whose relationship with Swinburne's verse has been dramatically neglected as yet, that we almost find an equivalent of Swinburne's metaphorical use of blossoms to describe flames of unusual form and intensity. In 'Autumn Mood' we first witness the apparition of a blazing crocus in an autumnal twilight landscape: 'Let the tender flowering flame of the exquisite crocus of sorrow | Sadden the green of the grass to the pathos of gentle September'; then, a few lines below, almost as if introduced by the depiction of the real flower of fire, the will-o'-the-wisps which rise from marshy waters are likened to a vibrating efflorescence:

> And below the slopes and scarps, where the strangled rill
> Blackens to rot,
> Let the unrest of the troublous hour
> Blossom on through the night, and the running flow'r
> O' the fatuous fire flicker, and flicker, and flare,

---

[77] *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 41 (see also the note to these lines on the same page).
[78] Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 164.

Through the aimless dark of disaster, the aimless light of despair.[79]

4. The Marine Blossoms

For all their variety, the blossoms of fire are not the most pervasive and prolific category of flower images in Swinburne's oeuvre. That distinction falls to the foam-flowers, their aquatic relatives. Called 'flowers of foam' in 'Love at Sea' and significantly lacking an equivalent in Gautier's hypotext of the poem, these blossoms indicate the mass of foam produced by the waves, wind or tide on the sea surface.[80] A sign of the great originality of this imagery, the *OED* credits Swinburne with coining the compound 'foam-flower' in *Poems and Ballads* (1866).[81] True as that may be, the impalpable and stimulating sea foam had already been represented through similar flower images a year before the collection. In Swinburne's tragedy *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) the marine surface is likened — perhaps by extending the 'starry sea-flower crowns' of the Nereids in *Prometheus Unbound* — to 'Cold girdles and crowns of the sea-gods, cool blossoms of water and foam'.[82] Swinburne may have also drawn on Victorian poems associating flowers and water, most notably Tennyson's highly experimental *Maud* (1855), where the hallucinating speaker daydreams about a 'far-off sail' which is 'half-lost in the liquid azure bloom of a crescent sea'.[83] Moreover,

---

[79] *The poems of Sydney Dobell* (London: Walter Scott, 1887), p. 294.
[80] The first use of 'foam flower' to indicate the North-American herb *Tiarella cordifolia* dates to 1895 (see the *OED* entry for 'flower', item C2). While I think that this herb is never alluded to by Swinburne's images, it goes without saying that adjectives like 'foamy' and 'snowy' have been used to describe white and soft inflorescences both in horticultural publications and in poetry. See, for example, John Ruskin's false etymology of cyme (a type of flower clusters) from the Greek *κῦμă* ('a swelling or rising wave') in his *Proserpina*. John Ruskin, *Love's Meinie and Proserpina*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 306.
[81] See the *OED* entry for 'foam', C1. a.
[82] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, p. 318. *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, p. 584.
[83] *Tennyson*, p. 526.

Swinburne might have been influenced by a number of images merging water and flora in contemporary French literature, especially in the post-Romantic verse he was much interested (see for instance Gautier's 'Symphonie en blanc majeur', which correlates white camellias and hawthorn with snow, foam, swans, satin, white skin and flesh).

The Hellenic undertones of *Atalanta in Calydon*'s floral image, which allude to the birth of Aphrodite, are indicative of the strongly mythopoeic character of Swinburne's marine flowers. Often structural to his poetical mythmaking, the foam-flowers are the visible traces, in nature, of the poet's deities, symbols both of the dark goddess of his early production and of the solar God of his late lyrics (at least up to 'The Nympholept'). As I have already pointed out, *Poems and Ballads* is interspersed with these images: while in 'The Triumph of Time' they appear in the variant form 'salt-flowers', which evokes the divinized maternal sea, in 'A Leave-Taking' they describe the effect of the tide on the waves ('One moon-flower making all the foam-flowers fair'); in 'Hendecasyllabics', 'the flower of foam' is inventively morphed into a specific flower, a white 'lily' floating on sterile and roaring billows.[84]

Swinburne's later works are equally abundant in these blooms. Included in *Poems and Ballads Second Series* (1878) and inspired by a desolate stretch of coast in the Isle of Wight, 'A Forsaken Garden' shows the everlastingness of these flowers. The poem celebrates the supreme victory of Death over the landscape ('the sheer cliff', 'terrace' and 'meadow' ruined by the incessant and all-engulfing sea waves), while at the same time asserting the impermanence of human 'love'. As the spectral voice of a long-dead lover notices in the poem, the coastal flowers are bound to fade, while the

---

[84] Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads*, pp. 31, 44, 162.

'foam-flowers' on the sea surface, an embellishment of the waters that erode the cliffs, will survive: 'For the foam-flowers endure when the rose-blossoms wither'.[85] In a visionary passage from the first canto of *Tristram of Lyonesse*, a sequence depicting Tristram and Iseult on the ship 'The Swallow', the poet goes as far as to arrange the marine blossoms ('sea-roses') with the snow-flowers on account of their white and fleecy aspect, and with the fire-flowers because they are reddened by the sunlight:

> Sweet gale shook all the foam-flowers of thin snow
> As into rainfall of sea-roses shed
> Leaf by wild leaf on that green garden-bed
> Which tempests till and sea-winds turn and plough:
> For rosy and fiery round the running prow
> Fluttered the flakes and feathers of the spray,
> And bloomed like blossoms cast by God away
> To wast on ardent water.[86]

The foamy blossoms loom large in 'Thalassius' and 'The Garden of Cymodoce', two poems included in *Songs of the Springtides* (1880), 'a watershed volume in Swinburne's career'.[87] The four demandingly long poems of this collection, which also comprises three short lyrics, are all concerned, although to different degrees, with the poet's biography and literary models, his passionate faith in the poetical word — symbolized by the deified Sun (Apollo) — and his adoration of the sea. In his recent study of these themes, the 'conceptual networks' of the collection, John Walsh does not include flower images among the networks proper. However, he stresses their crucial role in 'Thalassius', where the floral imagery 'ties all elements together', a fact that reflects the great metaphorical adaptability of Swinburne's

---

[85] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, pp. 158-160.
[86] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 222.
[87] John A. Walsh, '"Quivering Web of Living Thought": Conceptual Networks in Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World*, ed. by Levin, p. 31.

elemental flowers.[88] Redolent of these figurations, ‘Thalassius’ focuses on the individual growth of a mysterious child, the offspring of a sea-nymph and the divine Sun. The marine creature, who eventually becomes a poet, is followed through the vicissitudes of his artistic development, from his first contact with human passions to his understanding of the Symbolist necessity of being ‘no more a singer, but a song’ (III, p. 309). In the first stanza, which depicts the new-born baby that the waves (‘its twin-born tenderer spray-flowers’) have washed up on the shore, we witness not only the fundamental role of floral images in the mythopoeia of *Songs of the Springtides*, but also the sound effects created by their obsessive repetition:

> Upon the *flowery forefront* of the year,
> One wandering by the grey-green April *sea*
> Found on a reach of shingle and shallower sand
> Inlaid with starrier glimmering jewellery
> Left for the *sun*'s love and the light wind's cheer
> Along the *foam-flowered* strand
> Breeze-brightened, something nearer *sea* than land
> Though the last *shoreward blossom-fringe* was near,
> A babe asleep with *flower-soft face* that gleamed
> To *sun* and *seaward* as it laughed and dreamed,
> Too sure of either love for either's fear,
> Albeit so birdlike slight and light, it seemed
> Nor man nor mortal child of man, but fair
> As even *its twin-born tenderer spray-flowers* were,
> That the wind scatters like an *Oread*’s hair (III, p. 295).

Here, as almost everywhere else in Swinburne’s production, the signifier of the elemental flowers serves a symbolic function. The insistence on alliterating flower images imitates the wash and hiss of the waves and, by repeating the voiceless

[88] Walsh, p. 41.

fricatives /s/ and /f/, enhances the opening sounds of the fundamental ingredients of Swinburne's marine and solar myth (*s*now-*f*ire-*f*oam-*s*ea-*f*lower-*s*un-*s*ong).

In 'The Garden of Cymodoce', which draws on Swinburne's pleasant recollections of his trip to the island of Sark in 1876, flower images are essential in creating the poet's visionary topography of the isle: they are deployed to represent the archipelago of the Channel Islands, to deify and sexualize Sark, to describe the island's verdant fields and, in an imaginative tour de force, first to evoke the otherworldly environment of its caves and then to celebrate the heavenly power of verse. Because of the density and significance of these images, the poem deserves separate treatment, all the more so in that it has received far less scholarly attention than other pieces of the same collection such as 'Thalassius' and 'On the Cliffs' (Swinburne's ultimate homage to the figure of Sappho).

5. 'The Garden of Cymodoce': The Maternal in Bloom

A week before the publication of Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*, the 'Literary Gossip' column of *The Athenæum* observed that the title 'The Garden of Cymodoce', 'one of the pieces' of the forthcoming volume, had 'puzzled many people' and concluded that 'it may be as well to explain that it is a description of the island of Sark'.[89] Swinburne himself must have felt the need to explain the subject matter of the poem when a few days later (13 May 1880) he wrote to Matthew Arnold: 'Do you know my favourite corner of all on earth known to me, the island of Sark? If so, you cannot (I trust) fail to recognize in the third poem of my new book an attempt to

[89] [Anon.], 'Literary Gossip', *The Athenæum*, 24 April 1880, p. 538.

supersede Murray by a simple and complete 'Handbook' in rhyme'.[90] Swinburne's reference to Sark, an island in the archipelago of the Channel Islands, and to John Murray – a London publisher whose series of *Handbooks for Travellers* became extremely popular in the nineteenth century – suggests the unique, and at times hermetic, topographical nature of the text. As Swinburne pointed out in a 1901 letter to William Sharp, 'The Garden of Cymodoce' draws on the poet's pleasant recollections of his two-day trip to Sark in May 1876 (the island had become a tourist spot in the early 1840s in the wake of the opening of new commercial routes with the continent).[91] The poem, a Pindaric ode, is probably the most critically neglected of the four long pieces included in *Songs of the Springtides*, and is notorious for its wealth of fiendishly dense and imaginative descriptions of the island.

In order to better appreciate (and in some cases indeed to decipher) Swinburne's poetic representation of Sark, I will read the poem as a unique 'Handbook' in verse and juxtapose his idiosyncratic geography of the isle with that provided by popular guidebooks of his time. As I have not found any reference to Sark in the travel guides published by John Murray before 1876, the selection of guide books that I have taken into consideration comprises *The Sark Guide* (1845), *Scrambles in Serk* (1861) and the *Bichard's Guide to the Islands of Guernsey, Alderney, Sark & Herm* (1863). *The Sark Guide* was written by G. W. James and printed both in Guernsey by Henri Brouard, a publisher connected with the local newspaper 'The Star', and in London by Longman. The *Bichard's Guide* takes its name from Thomas Mauger Bichard, another Guernsey publisher, who issued Victor Hugo's poem *La Voix de Guernsey* (1867), whereas *Scrambles in Serk* was published in London by Longman and in Guernsey by

[90] *The Swinburne Letters*, IV, p. 142.
[91] *The Swinburne Letters*, VI, p. 153.

Redstone. This bibliographical information seems to indicate that the three texts were deeply rooted in the local reality of the Channel Islands – thus possibly offering an authentic and first-hand account of Sark – and that two of them had also a relatively wide circulation in England. Even though I cannot be sure whether Swinburne ever read these books, it is almost certain that he consulted a number of travel guides before his journey to the island and that these contributed to forming his horizon of expectations. In the letter he wrote from Guernsey immediately after his trip to Sark (15 May 1876), he explains how La Coupée – the narrow isthmus between the two parts of the island known as Little and Great Sark –, did not in fact possess the fearful aspect he had read of and condemns the 'lies of guide-books'.[92] If it is not possible to ascertain a direct textual influence, these books present at least a useful degree of textual familiarity with 'The Garden of Cymodoce' and provide a valuable account of the geography of the island available to Swinburne both before and during his trip.

The poem opens with a passionate apostrophe to a divine 'mother', the female personification of a marine world ('Sea, and bright wind, and heaven of ardent air') and the first love of the speaker (III, p. 326). The poetic 'I' begs her to 'be/ A spirit of sense', to make his song encapsulate that synthesis of sensuality and transcendence which we have seen as distinctive of Swinburne's flora (III, p. 326). Even though the name of the goddess is never mentioned in the text, we can deduce it from the title of the ode. By elaborating on the rather unknown figure of Cymodoce – a sea-nymph that appears in many classical sources, from Hesiod's Theogony to the *Aeneid*, and as a minor character in Spenser's epic – Swinburne weaves, from the very first lines, an original mythical universe. Cymodoce, literally the 'wave-receiver' ('who stills with

[92] *The Swinburne Letters*, III, p. 187.

ease the waves in the misty sea and the gusts of strong-blowing winds'), is hailed as the goddess of the sea and especially as the divinity of the Channel Islands.[93] In the first strophe, the speaking voice blesses her for offering him 'the fairest' and 'more divine' of her 'fold', the isle of Sark, an alluring garden circumscribed by its sister islands ('Engirt, enringed, enrolled, | In all thy flower-sweet flock of islands dear and near') (III, p. 327). The intricate metaphorical blossoming that unfolds here and thrives throughout the whole poem becomes suddenly clearer if we observe how, even in these early stages of Swinburne's fancy representation of the island, precise reference to the actual morphology of the archipelago is evident and essential. Not only is Sark truly situated in the middle of the Channel Islands – it is 'enringed' by Alderney on the north, and by the larger Guernsey and Jersey on the west and south-east sides respectively –, but it is also described as the most beautiful of these isles by our selection of travel guides. Introduced to the reader as a unique 'romantic spot', an 'island gem'[94] and 'the gem of the channel islands',[95] Sark is widely recognised as the most charming of all the 'flowers or jewels' that, in Swinburne's verse, adorn Cymodoce's 'deep soft breast'. Such vision of the island(s) as a sensual body, on which the mythopoeic structure of the whole poem pivots, was probably influenced by the rather voluptuous representation of the Nereid Cymodoce in the *Aeneid* (X, ll. 225-227):

> Cymodoce, whose voice excell'd the rest,
> Above the waves advanc'd her snowy breast;

[93] Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, ed. by M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 10.
[94] *Scrambles in Serk: Scenery, History, Laws of One of the Channel Islands* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1861), p. 16.
[95] *The Bichard's Guide to the Islands of Guernsey, Alderney, Sark & Herm* (Guernsey: T. M. Bichard, 1863), p. 84.

> Her right hand stops the stern; her left divides
> The curling ocean, and corrects the tides.[96]

As the fleshly image of the sea-nymph's bosom suggests, such an attractive sight of the island stirs the speaker's desire. His physical longing is expressed through lexical choices, turns of phrases and rhyme-words that recall the most lustful lines of *Poems and Ballads* (1866):

> That this was left for me,
> Mother, to have of thee,
> To touch, to taste, to see,
> To feel as fire fulfilling all my blood and breath,
> As wine of living fire
> Keen as the heart's desire
> That makes the heart its pyre
> And on its burning visions burns itself to death (III, pp. 327-328).

Intoxicated by 'wine of living fire', the speaking voice yearns to possess the feminised island through all his senses. The highly sensual and synesthetic nature of this appetite finds a perfect equivalent in Swinburne's scent memory of Sark. As Catherine Maxwell has shown, the poet explained his obsession with samphire soap by remarking its power of inducing everywhere the uplifting 'impression that you have just come in from breasting the breakers off the rocks of Alderney or Sark'.[97] The energising smell of Sark's waves – the perfume of the island's foam-flowers, as it were – is also implicitly evoked in a letter of October 1876 to Inchbold where Swinburne, immediately after relating how he had been apparently poisoned while

---

[96] I quote from John Dryden's translation of the poem, which was certainly known to Swinburne. See *Virgil's Aeneid*, trans. by John Dryden (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909), p. 334 The latin text is: 'quarum quae fandi doctissima Cymodocea | pone sequens dextra puppim tenet ipsaque dorso | eminet ac laeva tacitis subremigat undis'.

[97] Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 95.

asleep by the fragrance of some Indian lilies arranged in his bedroom, recalls his satisfying trip to Sark in the spring of that year, almost as if to contrast the heady miasma of the exotic blossoms with the life-giving air of the isle.[98]

The speaker, equally fond of the perfumed and stimulant billows of the isle, does not hesitate to embrace its 'murderous' seashore. In a long and syntactically convoluted passage – a sequence of seventeen lines without a full stop –, the coastline of Sark, where violent currents and underwater razor-sharp rocks have notoriously sunk many a ship, is likened to a deadly fortification ('some beleaguered city's war-breached wall/ With deaths enmeshed all round it in deep net') and then morphed into a voracious mouth ('the fanged edge of one hungering lip/ Or one tooth lipless of the ravening reef') (III, p. 328). Interestingly, such a figurative description of 'the most dangerous as well as the most difficult bit of navigation' in the Channel Islands – this is how Swinburne defined Sark's waters 'on the authority' of his father, an experienced admiral – closely echoes the accounts of the island's coasts in our group of travel guides.[99] In *Scrambles in Serk* the reader is repeatedly warned of 'the dangerous nature of the coast' and of its 'sunken rocks which on all sides belt the island'.[100] James's guide even draws on military imagery – of a kind very similar to that of Swinburne's passage – to describe the impenetrable and treacherous character of Sark's shore:

> An almost insurmountable barrier of perpendicular cliffs […] surrounds the island, giving to the exterior an appearance of rude fortification […] The eastern side especially is defended by submarine rocks and shelves, which run out in

[98] *The Swinburne Letters*, III, p. 210.
[99] *The Swinburne Letters*, IV, p. 142.
[100] *Scrambles in Serk*, p. 7.

> some parts a mile from the shore, producing great overfalls and dangerous eddies.[101]

In the same way that the Channel Islands are compared to a jewelled and alluring 'breast', the geomorphology of Sark's shore is here linked, through a similar mythopoeic shift, to the erotic tension that pervades the poem. The island's homicidal waters are converted into the last veil over 'the loveliest thing that shines against the sun', a creature which 'laughs' – the verb which triggers the personification – and entices the speaker from its unconquerable stronghold (III, p. 328). In one of the most regularly quoted stanzas of the poem, which is exceptionally rich in the aural effects that we have pointed out in with reference to 'Thalassius', the speaking voice celebrates the island as a rare flower:

> O flower of all wind-flowers and sea-flowers,
> Made lovelier by love of the sea
> Than thy golden own field-flowers, or tree-flowers
> Like foam of the sea-facing tree!
> No foot but the seamew's there settles
> On the spikes of thine anthers like horns,
> With snow-coloured spray for thy petals,
> Black rocks for thy thorns (III, p. 328).

As we have pointed out, this kind of floral imagery is typically Swinburnean and extremely protean. The coastal morphology of Sark provides the source domain of the metaphor: its spiky cliffs are 'anthers', its dark and sharp boulders are 'thorns' and the sprightly spray of the waves that 'are broken into lines of foam' resembles vaporous 'petals'.[102] At the same time, the island is viewed as the fairest of the

---

[101] G. W. James, *The Sark Guide* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845), p. 30.
[102] *Scrambles in Serk*, p. 7. See also *The Bichard's Guide*, p. 85.

innumerable flowery drifts of foam that are perpetually produced on the sea surface by the waves and the wind. These marine flowers are then compared and preferred to the 'golden' and foamy flowers of the fields and the trees ashore, thus establishing that dialectic between terrestrial and sea flowers which is also at work in several others of Swinburne's poems such as 'Relics' and 'A Forsaken Garden'.

What is observable in these stanzas – the naturalistic description of the shore and its merging with creative metaphors – is structural to the whole text. The long and numerous descriptive sequences of the poem, which closely follow the real geography of the island (as is confirmed by their textual proximity to the guides), feed the speaker's longing and offer him a verbal space where he may chase his love, a landscape which is animated by subjective floral symbolism and turned by mythopoeia into a divine body. As brilliantly pointed out in *The Athenæum*'s review of *Songs of the Springtides* (22 May 1880), the strength of the poem lies in this ambitious and unique balance of 'descriptive' and imaginative language: 'Consequently "The Garden of Cymodoce", triumphing as it undoubtedly does, over metrical difficulties never before attempted by the descriptive poet and at the same time full of picturesqueness, has something of the air of a *tour de force*'.[103]

In this perspective, the fact that the ode's description of Sark's coastline marks the beginning of a rapid disappearance of the speaker is quite telling. As noted by Margot K. Louis, 'The Garden of Cymodoce' stands out for the ambiguous vanishing of its poetic 'I', a sheer but seemingly unproblematic movement towards the

[103] [Anon.], review of Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Songs of the Springtides* (1880), *The Athenæum*, 22 May 1880, p. 656.

invisibility of the 'persona'.[104] While he is signalled by a large number of first-person pronouns and verbs in the first section of the poem (ll. 1-97), the speaker conceals himself from this point of the text onward and surfaces again only in the two conclusive stanzas. Covered under the descriptive sequences and their figurative blossoming, his constant presence may be detected, quite subtly, by noticing how he continues to address the island, as in the opening strophes, through second-person markers such as 'thine', 'thou', 'thy' and 'thee'. Variation in tense – the past tense of the individual recollection is substituted either with a descriptive present or with the simple past of the mythical narrative – also contributes to this apparent displacement towards impersonality.

The superficial vanishing of the poetic I also runs parallel to his (and the poem's) approach to the heart of the island, with the text organised, to quote again from *The Athenæum*'s review, as a real 'tour de force'. We witness a true poetic journey: after invoking the blessing of the sea-goddess Cymodoce ('be with my spirit of song as wings to bear'), the speaker contemplates the island in the breast of the nymph, caresses and lands to its coasts, walks on its fields and explores its body, penetrates this body and eventually rises above it. Formally, this shift of the poem's focus is signalled by the repeated incidence of verbs of movements, and adverbs and prepositions of direction. Explored by the speaker qua traveller, Sark is metaphorised as a blooming plant with eerie animal characters, an aquatic 'flower-body' which progressively unveils its (or rather *her*) most intimate parts.

Left on the foamy coastline of the isle, we are safely and finally transported inland through a purely mythical passage. Three stanzas, which may be reminiscent of the

---

[104] Margot K. Louis, *Swinburne and His Gods: The Roots and Growth of an Agnostic Poetry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), p. 142.

conclusive part of Shelley's major poem *Epipsychidion* (1821), narrate the legendary tale of the formation of the island. The 'lordly north wind', after eloping with 'the fairest of many king's daughters', moulded Sark as a bride-bed 'for his pleasure' by tearing off a plot of land from the continent (III, p. 329). Perfectly aligned with the amorous subject matter of the text, this legend directly introduces us to the view of the golden and luxuriant fields of Sark, where 'many a self-lit flower-illumined tree | Outlaughs with snowbright or with rosebright glee | The laughter of the fields whose laugh is gold' (III, p. 330). It is not surprising that this colourful representation chimes with the idyllic description of the valley of Dixcart in James's *Guide*:

> Very early in the spring Sark begins to wear an enlivened aspect. During the months of April, May, and June, there is a succession of wild flower in the valleys and on the hills; *Dixcart*, especially, is covered with a golden ground of flowering furze or gorse, enamelled with mats of primroses and violets, and the purple hyacinth in great luxuriance; then orchards like field of tinted blossom, with the honeysuckle and wild rose, diversify the scene.[105]

James's reference to the 'flowering furze' is particularly noteworthy as it corresponds to Swinburne's attention to the 'whin-bloom' (III, p. 329, l. 110) – the Northern term for furze or gorse – highlighting a botanical detail of the island that we also find in the poet's correspondence ('a road winding up between two hills blazing with furze and all kinds of spring flowers').[106] By the same token, even the rather obscure closing of this description, with its reference to the 'choral throats of thunder' which praise the marine 'throne' of the island, may be explained as the visionary analogue of a phenomenon noticed in *The Bichard's Guide*: 'The roar of the waters of the Channel, as they rise in foamy wrath against its barriers of granite, re-echoed by its

[105] *The Sark Guide*, p. 35.
[106] *The Swinburne Letters*, III, p. 187 (15 May 1876).

numerous caves and chasms, forms a beautiful contrast with the loveliness of its green sunny fields and shady dells'.[107]

Once he has entered into direct contact with the (floral) body of the island, the poetic I puts on an illustrious literary disguise before beginning his erotic exploration. Victor Hugo's journey to Sark serves as his screen, offering both an authoritative third-person point of view on the isle and the mythical aura required for the last movement of the poem. Hugo, one of the poets most admired and celebrated by Swinburne ever since his earliest poetic essays, lived in exile on the Channel Islands for eighteen years (three years in Jersey, from 1852-1855, and then fifteen years in Guernsey) and made a two-week visit to Sark in 1859.[108] Swinburne's record of his landing on the island is extremely vivid: Sark, feminised again through a set of creative flower images, celebrates the French poet ('Set all her fields aflower, her flowers aflame,/To applaud him that he came'), but is also moved by an unsounded lust for her titanic visitor ('One crowned and throned in story/ Above all empire's height') (III, p. 331, 333). Her maidenly blush is thinly concealed under an ambiguous double negative ('Nor surely flashed not something of delight') (III, p. 333). In a stanza that is extremely rich in topographical detail, we witness how the map of Sark, from east to north-west and then southward, becomes a mirror of her desire. This arousal initially invests the Creux Harbour, the 'principal landing-place' (J) of the island and thus, presumably, the first site to welcome Hugo.[109] The lofty air

[107] *The Bichard's Guide*, p. 85.
[108] Hugo also wrote a short handbook of the Channel Islands. See Victor Hugo, *L'Archipel de la Manche* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883).
[109] *The Sark Guide*, p. 31.

of the bay – a 'dark deep sea-gate' because of its 'nearly perpendicular' (J31) cliffs 'cut through' only by a tunnel[110] – and the way to the interior are faithfully sketched:

> Even from the dark deep sea-gate that makes way
> Through channelled darkness for the darkling day
> Hardly to let men's faltering footfall win
> The sunless passage in,
> Where breaks a world aflower against the sun (III, p. 333).

As is described by both the James's *Guide* and *The Bichard's Guide*, the 'sunless' archway connects the bay with 'the deep valley' of La Collinette, one of the greenest spots in the island.[111] The excitement infects then Les Autelets, a group of coastal rocks in the north-west side of the isle. Their name, the French for 'little altars' and the only toponym mentioned in the poem, is literally translated by Swinburne in 'Altarlets' (III, p. 333). *The James's Guide* plays on the meaning of the noun in a remarkably similar way, by quoting from John Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid* (a text which, as we have noticed, is among the hypotexts of Swinburne's poem):

> We come to the three *Aûtelets*, singularly stratified rocks, apparently once the pillars of support to some extensive cavern or trembling arch, long since washed away by storms.
> "Those hidden rocks th'Ausonian sailors knew,
> And called them altars when they rose to view." – Dryden.[112]

The passion of the island stretches south to the 'wilder' Little Sark and passes through the isthmus of La Coupée (III, p. 334), here represented in the emphatic

---

[110] *The Sark Guide*, p. 31.
[111] *The Bichard's Guide*, p. 85.
[112] *The Sark Guide*, p. 52.

manner which – as we have seen – Swinburne lampooned in his letters, 'with the sea rushing on either sides below'.[113]

Stimulated by Hugo's 'presence', the 'desirous delight' infiltrates 'the rocks and the hills' and burns deep into their 'heart', reaching the core of the isle, Cymodoce's flower-like (and flowery) womb (III, p. 335). Indeed, following this chthonic movement, the poem tries to introduce us to the most extraordinary and elusive attraction of Sark through a passage packed with Swinburne's typical mythopoeic questioning:

> Yea, down through the mighty twin hollows where never the sunlight shall be,
> Deep sunk under imminent earth, and subdued to the stress of the sea,
> That feel when the dim week changes by change of their tides in the dark,
> As the wave sinks under within them, reluctant, removed from its mark,
> Even there in the terror of twilight in bloom with its blossoms ablush,
> Did a sense of him touch not the gleam of their flowers with a fierier flush? (III, p. 335)

Accessible from the west coast of the island only at extremely low tide, the Gouliot caves are known for the bizarre appearance of their walls, which the ebb leaves covered by anemones, sponges and molluscs of various colours and forms (Swinburne's 'blossoms ablush' and 'flowers with a fierier flush'). According to *The Sark Guide*, this unique ecosystem may be divided into two parts, the 'grand Gouliot' and the 'lesser Gouliot', a geological detail that explains James's phrase 'twin-born sisters' and Swinburne's reference to the 'mighty twin hollows'.[114] The speaker wonders if the superficial stimulation of the visitors enflames the gloomy and uncanny atmosphere of the caves ('the terror of twilight'), making the red flowerage

---

[113] *Scrambles in Serk*, p. 5.
[114] *The Sark Guide*, p. 47.

of the walls even more obscenely lurid. The question form is not merely deployed to convey a sense of sublime mystery – and thus amplify the emotions connected with Hugo's landing –, but this rhetorical device, as often in Swinburne, also bears a trace of scepticism. The narrative is suddenly disrupted by a second and much more bewildering question concerning the power of poetry, a central motif in Swinburne's oeuvre and especially in *Songs of the Springtides*: 'But the secrets inviolate of sunlight in hollows untrodden of day, | Shall he dream what are these who beholds not? or he that hath seen, shall he say?' (III, p. 335). The ability of the (poetic) word to describe a place so otherworldly and, even worse, possibly invisible to the eyes of the poetic 'I' is now doubted. The author of *Scrambles in Serk*, describing the subterranean wonderland of the Gouliot, comes unconsciously close to such a dilemma when he honestly warns: 'a stranger might pass without knowledge of the wonders enshrined under his way'.[115] Eroded by these sceptical undertones, the Promethean third-person mask falls and the speaker, if not the poet, gradually resurfaces – with the tense changing, as we have seen above, from legendary past to eternal present. As he laments in his correspondence, Swinburne himself, after all, failed to explore the caves: 'we could not enter or even see into the great and famous cave of all, which only showed itself once a fortnight at extreme low tide: and of course not yesterday or this morning. These are omissions that must be repaired'.[116] If even the actual visitors of the caves might struggle with telling their mysteric experience, how can the poet 'who beholds not' sing them in verse? I believe that the answer formulated by the poem lies in the word 'dream' (l. 277): unlike the handbooks, the poet is asked to imagine, not merely to report. The lines that follow, an elaborate vision of the

[115] *Scrambles in Serk*, p. 47.
[116] *The Swinburne Letters*, III, p. 187 (15 May 1876).

caverns, are exceptionally close – it could not be otherwise – to the morphology of the caves that is described in our travel guides, but are nevertheless bathed in dreamy immateriality. Flower imagery is yet again the central trope:

> But afloat and afar in the darkness a tremulous colour subsides
> From the crimson high crest of the purple-peaked roof to the soft-coloured sides
> That brighten as ever they widen till downward the level is won
> Of the soundless and colourless water that knows not the sense of the sun:
> From the crown of the culminant arch to the floor of the lakelet abloom,
> One infinite blossom of blossoms innumerable aflush through the gloom.
> All under the deeps of the darkness are glimmering; all over impends
> An immeasurable infinite flower of the dark that dilates and descends,
> That exults and expands in its breathless and blind efflorescence of heart
> As it broadens and bows to the wave-ward, and breathes not, and hearkens apart (III, p. 336).

Of all the remarkable features of the caverns, the poet focuses particularly on the ghostly play of light that takes place within them, the 'reverberation' which James defines rather lyrically as 'worthy the trial of music'.[117] This pulsating gleam comes not only from the sun and the waves, but through the colour of the rocks – the 'purple' colour of the 'roof' may allude to the 'red' granite of the rocks – and the vivid hue of the animals attached to them.[118] (In this sense, we must notice the strong predominance of words indicating colours and light effects over terms related to more material semantic fields.) All these elements are imaginatively fused into an enormous and spectral flower, which fluctuates in synch with the rhythm of the waves, an ethereal equivalent of the slimy blossoms described in David Thomas Ansted and Robert Gordon Latham's 1862 scientific monograph on the Channel Island:

---

[117] *The Sark Guide*, p. 49.
[118] *The Sark Guide*, p. 49; *Scrambles in Serk*, p. 30.

> Its walls are partly covered with those singular currant-jelly-like animals one sees expanded like living flowers in marine aquaria; deep blood-red is the prevailing colour, but dark olive-green varieties are also common, and numerous yellow and brick-red patched are seen at intervals.[119]

Even Swinburne's insistence on the adjective 'infinite' might be a reworking of Ansted and Gordon's note on the 'infinite number of Tubulariae', marine creatures related to jellyfish that grow on the rocks of the cave.[120] If its similarities with the scientific volume testify to a certain, if limited, degree of concreteness of Swinburne's representation of the abyssal flora, the ghostliness and metaphysical resonance of the passage may owe something to Victor Hugo's novel *Les travailleurs de la mer* (1866), which is dedicated to Guernsey and revolves around the vicissitudes of a Guernseyman. At the beginning of the sixth section of the book ('Swinburne's favourite among Hugo's novels'),[121] the deep waters which surrounds the Douvres – a dangerous group of rocks between the Channel Islands and Saint Malo – are described as the lair of primordial life forms, which take shelter in the gloomy transparency of the chasm ('Des formes épouvantables, faites pour n'être pas vues par l'oeil humain, errent dans cette obscurité, vivantes […] y grossissent, s'y décomposent et s'y effacent dans la transparence sinistre').[122] Although much more sinister, the spectral and oneiric connotations of this submarine scenery as well as the hint at the creative power of the Unconscious share something with the primeval sacredness of Swinburne's living underworld:

---

[119] David Thomas Ansted and Robert Gordon Latham, *Channel Islands* (London: Allen and Co, 1862), p. 82.
[120] Ansted and Latham, p. 83.
[121] Louis, *Swinburne*, p. 146.
[122] Victor Hugo, *Les travailleurs de la mer* (Paris: Librairie illustrée, 1877), pp. 177-178.

> Voir le dedans de la mer, c'est voir l'imagination de l'Inconnu. […] Le gouffre est analogue à la nuit. Là aussi il y a sommeil, sommeil apparent du moins, de la conscience de la création. Là, dans une paix affreuse, les ébauches de la vie, presque fantômes, tout à fait démons, vaquent aux farouches occupations de l'ombre.[123]

In this perspective, it is little wonder that Hugo's passage is quoted by Jane Desmarais in her discussion of the new nineteenth-century 'aquarium poetics' and of their link to the imagery of the hothouse, a cultural connection which has been discussed more thoroughly in my Introduction.[124] Indeed, the protean appearance of Sark's caverns, a secluded marine space where animal and vegetal forms fade into one another, is very much in tune with the aesthetics of aquaria – which, tellingly, are also referenced by Ansted and Latham in their description of Gouliot's fauna.

In an attempt to fix his hallucinatory depiction of the caves through myth and more concrete language, Swinburne fashions a long comparison, which, however, rapidly gets out of hand and turns into one of the most hermetic parts of the poem. If the form of an Olympian 'reverted' cup 'exhausted of wine' resembles the shape of the cave – and here Swinburne might be punning on the toponym of the caverns, which comes from the French 'goulot', 'bottleneck' –, so the rose traces left on the 'beaker' by the voluptuous lips of the water nymph 'Dione' – who, according to several ancient sources, was Aphrodite's mother – are compared to the 'sun-coloured tapestry' on the walls (and, a few lines below, to two specific luminous effects, both

[123] Hugo, *Les travailleurs*, p. 178.

[124] Jane Desmarais, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), pp. 198-203 (Hugo's passage is quoted in translation on pp. 198-199). For Hugo and 'The Garden of Cymodoce' see also Louis, *Swinburne*, pp. 145-149.

of which were noticed in *Scrambles in Serk*) (III, pp. 336-337).[125] The fact that the surface of the cave is associated with the mouth of a goddess of love adds to the sense of desire that pervades the place as well as to its vividness ('rose').

Less focused on the zoological rarities of the caves than on their fleeting aura, the episode of the Gouliot sublimates Sark's humanised landscape into the celestial and luminous vision of the last two stanzas of the text. Once the exploration of the island is complete, its (her?) body vanishes: the poem's insistence on personification culminates in what almost amounts to disembodiment. The poem is now completely detached from the topography of the island and, it should be noted, from any passage from the travel guides (except for a rather vague reference to the highest part of the isle in the last strophe). In a movement prepared by the references to the 'rose' mouth of Dione and the form of the caverns, we witness the ascension to a paradisiacal 'rose in bloom', an inverse airy equivalent of the caves:

> Even like that hollow-bosomed rose, inverse
> And infinite, the heaven of thy vast verse,
> Our Master, over all our souls impends,
> Imminent; we, with heart-enkindled eyes
> Upwondering, search the music-moulded skies
> Sphere by sweet sphere, concordant as it blends
> Light of bright sound, sound of clear light, in one,
> As all the stars found utterance through the sun.
> And all the heaven is like a rose in bloom,
> Flower-coloured, where its own sun's fires illume
> As from one central and imperious heart
> The whole sky's every part (III, pp. 337-338).

[125] For Dione see the influential *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, ed. by William Smith (London: John Murray, 1850), I, p. 1032.

Hugo's 'vast verse' – which resonates both in Sark's sky and in the speaker's soul (over which it 'impends' like a 'heaven') – is visualised as a celestial blend of sound and light where radiant shapes produce harmonious tunes and rhythmically move in flower-like circular patterns. This ultravisionary representation is evidently reminiscent of Dante's 'candida rosa' (the heavenly 'white rose'), the circular form in which the souls of the Blessed are arranged in the empyrean. Indeed, Dante's *Paradise* is explicitly evoked. The expression 'sphere by sweet sphere' seems to be almost literally borrowed from the lexicon of its cosmography, and even the extremely ambiguous adjective 'flower-coloured' may be explained as an allusion to the colour of the celestial rose in the *Commedia*. Given the reference to the rays of the sun ('sun's fires') in the same line, it is tempting to think that the indistinct hue of Swinburne's rose may be similar to the yellowy luminescence of Dante's:

> Nel giallo de la rosa sempiterna,
> che si digrada e dilata e redole
> odor di lode al sol che sempre verna.[126]

While Dante also draws on the semantic field of odour in order to express more fully the complexity of his vision – thereby creating one of the most innovative synesthetic metaphors of his poem, Swinburne confines his cross-sensory images to the more abstract domains of hearing and sight. However, both poets capitalise on the intersensoriality of flower imagery in a bid to lend physical immediacy to

[126] Dante Alighieri, *Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, ed. by Umberto Bosco, Giovanni Reggio, Michela Volante (Milano: Le Monnier Scuola, 2011), p. 516 (canto XXX, ll. 124-126). Charles Bagot Cayley (1823-1883), a friend of the Rossettis and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's favourite translator of Dante's poem, translated the passage as such: 'To the yellow of that Rose, which ne'er decays, | Which blows, and spreads, and offers to yon Sun | Ever May-making, sweet savors of praise'. See *Dante's Divine Comedy*, trans. by C. B. Cayley (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854), p. 227. On Cayley see the Rossetti Archive: <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s282.raw.html> [accessed 2 June 2020].

unutterable otherwordly phenomena. In this sense, it is important to notice that the tercet by Dante quoted above may have also influenced Swinburne's passage on the caves, particularly the depiction of the 'immeasurable infinite flower of the dark'. The relative clause attached to this abyssal blossom ('that dilates and descends') precisely echoes the Italian turn of phrase 'che si digrada e dilata', which, apart from the reversal of the two verbs, it exactly translates. Indeed, the fact that the submarine floral phantasmagoria of 'The Garden of Cymodoce' is indebted to Dante's heavenly rose is hardly surprising. As we have noticed, Sark's drowned world, the inner shrine of the goddess Cymodoce, is as deified as the Christian empyrean. While Dante extols the Christian God and his immortal Word, the post-Romantic Swinburne glorifies his own pagan-inflected myth of the poetic word. Moreover, Swinburne himself openly associated Dante's *Paradise* to the waters of the Channel when he unfavourably compared the bliss of the former to his regenerative swim off the coast of Shoreham, an experience that he narrated to his sister Alice as a kind of amniotic bath in a paradisal 'liquid' sunlight:

> And it was but for a few minutes – but I was in Heaven! The whole sea was literally golden as well as green – it was liquid and living sunlight in which one lived and moved and had one's being. And to feel that in deep water is to feel – as long as one is swimming out, if only a minute or two – as if one was in another world of life, and one far more glorious that even Dante ever dreamed of in his Paradise.[127]

In 'The Garden of Cymodoce' the chthonic flower of darkness and the airy blossom of light are strictly interrelated, as is suggested both by the common model of Dante's

[127] *The Swinburne Letters*, V, p. 275. For Swinburne's obsession with swimming see Rikky Rooksby, 'The Algernonicon, or Thirteen Ways of Looking at *Tristram of Lyonesse*', in *The Whole Music*, ed. by Rooskby and Shrimpton, pp. 76-77; Julia Saville, *Victorian Soul-Talk: Poetry, Democracy, and the Body Politic* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 221-262. and the already cited Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 95.

'white rose' and by their form – Hugo's poetry is apotheosised as a 'rose in bloom' whose shape is identical, although reversed, to the flower-like form of Sark's caverns. By the same token, and most cogently here, the structural connection between the two complementary blossoms, which has been discussed by Margot K. Louis also with reference to Hugo's observations on the 'two infinities' in his novel *Les Misérables*, seems to reinforce the possibility that the poetic word, which is the overt target of the second metaphorical flower, may be also referred to by the first.[128] If the heavenly rose symbolises how poetry infuses and harmonises nature, the aquatic flower, which is a prefiguration of the former blossom, may be seen as hinting at the unknown genesis of verse and, in particular, at its development – its gestation, as it were. In this perspective, the poetic word originates from a generative erotica which is similar to that described by Yisrael Levin in his brilliant analysis of Swinburne's 'Off Shore', a poem which is much in tune with 'The Garden of Cymodoce' and thus constitutes a valuable lens for interpreting its polysemous flora.[129]

'Off Shore', which is included in *Studies in Song* (1880) and was written almost at the same time as 'The Garden of Cymodoce', features similarly metamorphic and abyssal blossoms. Through the effervescent anapaestic rhythms of its stanzas, four dimeter lines closed by a hexameter, the poem chronicles the sexual union between the sun and the sea, the two protagonists of Swinburne's solar mythology. The stimulation of the summery sunbeams penetrates deep into the feminised water, reaching the luxuriant seabed ('Its wild-weed forests of crimson and russet and olive

---

[128] See Louis, *Swinburne*, pp. 146-147. While I am certainly indebted to her insightful reading of the poem, I think that Louis insists excessively on the hostility of Sark's underworld: in my opinion, there is no danger in the darkness of Cymodoce, just harmony and creation.
[129] Levis, 'Solar Erotica', pp. 55-64.

and gold') (V, p. 46). As observed by Levin, the sea's excitement yields an abundance of flower imagery:

> The submarine flora, unable to contain itself any more, bursts in what is simultaneously an act of ejaculation and sylvan birth. The "snow-soft swarm" and "white blossomlike butterflies," which later become "snow-coloured petals" and "flakes [or] blossoms of snow," represent the long-awaited efflorescence of the former "blossomless frondage".[130]

Enflamed by the caresses of the sun and rippled by the wind, the sea spumes so intensely that many flecks of foam are blown upward and waft over the water. Described as 'a legion of flowers on the wing', Swinburne's elemental blossoms congregate in full regalia on the sea surface to celebrate the erotic Apollonian 'festival':

> Like flowers upon flowers
> In a festival way
> When hours after hours
> Shed grace on the day,
> White blossomlike butterflies hover and gleam through the snows of the spray (V, pp. 51-52).

As Catherine Maxwell has brilliantly remarked, in Swinburne's view 'the watery womb of the sea is evidently a place of transmutation and transformation'.[131] Just as the 'blossomlike butterflies' of 'Off Shore' constitute the atmospheric release of the libidinal energy stored in the sun-caressed and blossomy 'dusk of the dim sea's womb' (V, p. 47), so the *ne plus ultra* of human speech (Hugo's verse), idolatrised as a

---

[130] Levin, 'Solar Erotica', p. 61.

[131] Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 215.

cosmic rose, springs from the feeling of desire that grows secretly in the depths of Sark. It is this increasing passion, a creative – literally *po(i)etic* – force, that the expanding flower of the dark typifies. While Swinburne's description of the Gouliot caves undoubtedly metaphorises the 'dark core', a maternal and bodily space, 'from which poetic language and imagery is generated',[132] the spectral flower that blooms in this underworld may be read as representing a creative principle even larger than the maternal, or, rather, a maternal energy which encompasses the formalising masculine principle in that it presupposes its action. Indeed, in both 'The Garden of Cymodoce' and 'Off Shore', this feminine principle, which Swinburne – as several of the most revolutionary artists of his time – links to the sea, is viewed as anticipating the 'invasive power' of the sun (one may speculate whether it is able to do so of its own accord or because it was already touched by the solar force).[133] If it is true that the elemental flowers are described as the product of Apollo's moulding rays, a similar kind of flower was nevertheless already blossoming – at least potentially, phantasmatically as it were – in the abyss of the sea; analogously, even though it is the music of the sun which ultimately informs the world, the sea kingdom is also (and originally) animated by an autonomous rhythmic movement. Although it may be slightly reductive to entirely equate the marine movement with the kinetic manifestation of an everlasting sexual force – 'Love, that is the first and last of all things made', as this key element of Swinburne's unsystematic mythopoeia is apostrophised in the 'Prelude' to *Tristram of Lyonesse*[134] – it is undeniable that, in the

---

[132] Maxwell, *The Female Sublime*, p. 216.

[133] The solar force is described as an 'invasive power' in Swinburne' late poem 'A Nympholept', included in *Astrophel and Other Poems*. See Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 322 (l. 13).

[134] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 206. It is important to remember that Swinburne's primordial marine energy often encompasses both the universal erotic-generative force and the death drive.

two poems commented on above, the sedative ebb and flow of the sea is transformed by Eros into an expanding rather than an oscillatory motion. In the mythical structures of *Songs of the Springtides* and *Studies in Songs* (but this may apply, to various degrees, also to earlier and later phases of Swinburne's poetics) sexual desire appears to be posited as the original impulse of artistic creation. Tellingly, this drive manifests either in the body of the aquatic maternal or, less frequently, in that of the speaker, but almost never in the celestial body of the Sun.[135]

While an in-depth discussion of Swinburne's mythical configuration(s) goes far beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important here to remark how in 'The Garden of Cymodoce' Swinburne uses flower imagery to emblematise an ultra-maternal creative drive. Not only for their sensory richness, but also for their common hermaphroditism – whose importance for nineteenth to early twentieth-century flower poetics was examined in the previous chapter – flowers furnish Swinburne with the ideal conceptual and linguistic tool to envisage the mythical fusion of the feminine and the masculine principles (the sea and the sun), their potential compresence in the maternal source of poetry, as well as their actual compresence in the poetic word. Swinburne's elemental flowers, which are both sensual and spiritual phenomena, and especially his divinised sea-flowers, are particularly suited for this purpose. Indeed, although though they hardly ever symbolise the process of poetic creation to the same extent as in 'The Garden of Cymodoce', Swinburne's blossoms often hint at his (mythical) conception of verse, thus revitalising the well-worn literary association between flowers and poems. For example, in 'Thalassius', the

[135] Love is pivotal also in 'On the Cliffs' and 'Thalassius', and even more so in Swinburne's translation 'The Grand Chorus of Birds from Aristophanes', included in *Studies in Song*. See Louis, *Swinburne*, pp. 119-142.

mother of the titular protagonist ('the sun's child and the sea's', III, p. 309) weaves for him a crown of marine and terrestrial elements – sea-flowers and laurel – in a bid to break his condition of spiritual and physical debauchery:

> His mother, passing forth her fair heaven,
> With goodlier gifts than all save gods can give
> From earth or from the heaven where sea-things live,
> With shine of sea-flowers through the bay-leaf braid
> Woven for a crown her foam-white hands had made,
> To crown him with land's laurel and sea-dew (III, p. 307).

While the sea-flowers indicate the half-marine nature of the boy, the laurel obviously alludes to his solar father. Like Thalassius, who is the child of a sea-nymph and the Sun, the true poetic song – which can rescue the would-be poet from his corrupted state – is presented as the product of the union of Apollo and the sea.

In this respect, it is important to remark that the figure of the nymph is essential in 'Thalassius'. Her function in the poem is indicative of the role of nymphs in the mythical system which has been outlined. Nymphs are not merely deities of the waters, they are also closely associated with the Muses in that they share many functions, not least that of presiding over the arts. As is pointed out by Jennifer Larson:

> The Muses, Charites, and Horai are groups closely allied to the nymphs, and they fulfil under other names many of the functions otherwise attributed to nymphs (e.g., causing the crops to ripen or producing inspiration). […] There can be little doubt that the Muses and the Charites developed from the same ancestral stock as the nymphs and are in fact more specialized members of the same general group. Both had localized cults that spread within limited areas, yet they became known on a Panhellenic scale at an early date. The Muses' function […] as the catalysts of divine inspiration correlates with aspects of the

> more humble phenomenon of nympholepsy, and their associations with mountains, springs, and the pastoral milieu are definitely nymphlike.[136]

The presence of these figures in Swinburne's mythopoeia contrasts with Apollo's exclusive domain over the arts and offers a feminine alternative to the divinity of poetry. If in a poem where nymphs are significantly absent such as 'By the North Sea' (included in *Studies in Song*) the only active power in the creation seems that of the sun ('the sea has the sun for a harper | the sun as the sea for a lyre')[137], in 'The Garden of Cymodoce' the nymph is described, conversely, as a 'harper' (III, p. 334, l. 258), and in 'Thalassius' the womanised tide is said to 'keep rhyme' and actively contributes to the rhythm of the world (III, p. 309, l. 470).[138]

---

[136] Jennifer Larson, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 7-8. Swinburne explicitly thematised the phenomenon of nympholepsy in 'A Nympholept', for which see Louis, *Swinburne*, pp. 164- 182 and Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo*, pp. 131-146.

[137] Swinburne, *Major Poems*, p. 201.

[138] For Swinburne's tentative parallel between Thalassius's mother and the Homeric nymph Thetis in a letter to Edmund Gosse see Levin, *Swinburne's Apollo*, p. 95.

CHAPTER 2

Paterian Interlude: Aesthetic Initiation, 'Urbanatural' Landscape, and the Flowers of Art

As it is honestly acknowledged at the very beginning of one of the most recent and fertile contributions to the subject of Victorian ecology, 'The notion of applying principles of ecocriticism to Victorian literature has been relatively late in developing' and 'the field is still being shaped'.[1] Indeed, over the last fifteen years, while general critical and historical questions, such as 'Was There a Victorian Ecology?' and 'Where Is Victorian Ecocriticism?', have been raised and discussed, much has also been done to bolster the development of ecocritical readings of Victorian authors, works and literary genres.[2] Within this growing tradition of studies, Aestheticism and Decadence have nevertheless remained, strikingly, an unchartered field.[3] This chapter aims to help fill this gap by focusing on one of the founders of the Aesthetic Movement, Walter Pater. I will primarily survey three of Pater's short narratives: 'The Child in the House' – published in 1878 and the first piece of proper fiction to be printed by Pater –, 'An English Poet' – probably composed alongside or shortly after 'The Child', but left unfinished – and 'Emerald

---

[1] Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison, 'Introduction: Practical Ecocriticism and the Victorian Text', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical Perspectives*, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 1.

[2] For the debate on Victorian ecocriticism and a fuller bibliography see *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature*, ed. by John Parham (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002); John Parham, 'Editorial', *Green Letters*, 14 (2011), 5-9; Jesse Oak Taylor, 'Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (2015), 877-894, and Mazzeno and Morrison, 'Introduction', pp. 3-5.

[3] One exception is Neil Sammells, 'Wilde Nature', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Publications, 1998), pp. 124-133. See also the recently published Patricia Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature: Ecofeminism in Late Victorian Women's Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019).

Uthwart' – published in 1893, one year before Pater's death. These three narratives have been traditionally grouped together by critics for their common autobiographical elements (reflecting Pater's infancy and school days) and their shared attention to the growth of a sensitive intellectual mind – a pervasive motif in Pater, but here at its purest.[4] Such affinities, evident in many textual parallels, will all be reinforced by my reading. Tellingly, floral images are omnipresent in all three narratives and, as we shall see, symbolise Pater's vision of landscape, nature, and aesthetic initiation.

The most noticeable feature of the natural environment as depicted in these narratives is its extreme, in fact almost unnatural, luxuriance. Seemingly suspended in an Edenic time when the flowers of April intermingle with the fruits of autumn ('and the blossom of an old pear-tree showing across it in late April, against the blue, below which the perfumed juice of the find of fallen fruit in autumn was so fresh', nature is often an inexhaustible source of pleasurable and refining sensations for the subject. In 'The Child in the House' natural elements play a pivotal role in the 'brain-building' of the protagonist,[5] who remembers how one evening, as a child, having broken into a hitherto undiscovered garden, he chanced upon a grand fiery-coloured tree, the vehicle of his aesthetic initiation:

---

[4] See Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'Introduction', in Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. by Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014), pp. 1-66. For the analogies between the three narratives see Benedetta Bini, 'Alle origini del ritratto: 'An English Poet' di Walter Pater', in *Percorsi. Studi in onore di Angela Giannitrapani*, ed. by Mirella Bini and Massimo Ferrari Zumbini (Viterbo: Betagamma, 1993), pp. 47-64 and Benedetta Bini, 'Genius loci: il pellegrinaggio di Emerald Uthwart', in *Walter Pater (1839-1894): Le forme della modernità. The Forms of Modernity*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Franco Marucci (Milano: Cisalpino, 1996), pp. 187-202. For a comprehensive account of Pater's short narratives see Elisa Bizzotto, *La mano e l'anima* (Milano: Cisalpino, 2001), pp. 65-95.

[5] Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, p. 84. Further page references appear in parentheses.

> And lo! within, a great red hawthorn, in full flower, embossing heavily the bleached and twisted trunk and branches, so aged that there were but few green leaves thereon — a plumage of tender crimson fire out of the heart of the dry wood. The perfume of the tree had now and again reached him, in the currents of the wind, over the wall, and he had wondered what might be behind it, and was now allowed to fill his arms with the flowers (p. 91).

The vision of this flaming mass of flowers, which demanded the exertion of all the senses ('perfume', 'fill his arms'…), haunts Florian Deleal in the years to come with the reds of the 'old Venetian masters or old Flemish tapestries' (p. 91). The plenitude of nature enhances the individual perception, triggering a more intense, i.e. synesthetic, relation to the world. Florian, now obsessed by 'beautiful physical things' and moved by a 'tyranny of the senses over him' (p. 91), is able to associate 'all thoughts to touch and sight, as a sympathetic link between himself and actual, feeling, living objects' (p. 92). Once the highest aesthetic faculty, the 'imaginative reason',[6] is properly awakened, inner and outer, soul and body can successfully merge – as Pater would say of Plato's genius – 'by a gymnastic "fused in music"'.[7] This 'intensity' of vision connected with nature, closely described in Pater's essay on Wordsworth (1874), entails a kind of sceptical and sensuous animism, a 'sense of life in natural objects'.[8] As Paul Tucker has brilliantly explained in his analysis of Pater's fragments on the French painter Corot, such a thriving landscape can result in actual mythopoesis inasmuch as it brings back to the observer that primitive aura 'in which

---

[6] To my knowledge, Pater uses the phrase 'imaginative reason' twice in his writings, both in the 1874 essay on Wordsworth and in 'The School of Giorgione' (first published in 1877). See Walter Pater, 'On Wordsworth', *The Fortnightly Review*, 21 (1874), 455-465 (p. 455) and Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 122. This expression is omitted in the revised version of 'Wordsworth' which was later included in Pater's collection of essays *Appreciations* (1889).
[7] *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), p. 236.
[8] *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, p. 130.

the old Greek gods were first begotten'.[9] Lush images of nature like 'The Child in the House' 's red hawthorn or the redolent tuberose evoked in 'An English Poet', are built on a Romantically-derived naturism and on vivid synaesthesia, and, tellingly, are all flower-based. As observed by Catherine Maxwell in her recent study of scent – which, therefore, necessarily also extends to flowers – in Pater's oeuvre, synaesthesia becomes indeed a fundamental trope, with his language constantly looking for 'words compact rather of perfume than of colour'.[10]

This rich natural imagery, however, is by no means exclusively the province of wild flowers. Rather, these 'strange blossoms', as the ones characteristic of Pater's Leonardo ('Out of the secret places of a unique temperament he brought strange blossoms and fruits hitherto unknown'), are always cultivated and arranged by an attentive florist.[11] As hinted at in my description of the red hawthorn, Paterian flowers grow and bloom in dainty gardens, not in the wilderness. Indeed, gardens are structural elements in the narratives under examination and the most tangible sign of the artificiality of nature as represented by Pater.

In 'The Child in the House', we are told at the very beginning of the story that the home where the protagonist's mind experiences its first artistic awakening is located, in 'a little place in the neighbourhood of a great city' – more precisely, 'not far

---

[9] See Paul Tucker, ''A Whole World of Transformation': Landscape and Myth in Walter Pater's MS Fragment on Corot', in *Walter Pater (1839-1894)*, ed. by Bizzotto and Marucci, p. 130. See also Stefano Evangelista, '"Outward Nature and the Moods of Men": Romantic Mythology in Pater's Essays on Dionysus and Demeter', in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002), pp. 107-118. For Pater's assessment of Wordsworth see Kenneth Daley, *The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001), pp. 17-50; J. P. Ward, 'An Anxiety of No Influence: Walter Pater on William Wordsworth', in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1991), pp. 63-75; and Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 277-290.

[10] The quotation is from 'Emerald Uthwart'. See Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 117-134.

[11] Walter Pater, *Studies in the History*, p. 66.

beyond the gloom and rumours of the town, among high garden-walls (pp. 83-85). This tranquil garden and the other 'neighboring gardens' (p. 85), which represent a liminal place between the city and the countryside, the ideal fusion of the artificial and the natural, do not isolate the child from the urban landscape; its effects on him are described in a passage which it is worth quoting at length:

> for the house, as I said, stood near a great city, which sent up heavenwards, over the weather-vanes, not seldom, its beds of rolling cloud and smoke, touched with storm or sunshine. But the child of whom I am writing did not hate the fog for the crimson lights which fell […]
> For it is false to suppose that a child's sense of beauty is dependent on any choiceness, or special fineness, in the objects which present themselves to it, though this indeed comes to be the rule with most of us in later life; earlier, in some degree, we see inwardly; and the child finds for itself, and with unstinted delight, a difference for the sense, in those whites and reds through the smoke on very homely buildings, and in the gold of the dandelions at the road-side, just beyond the houses, where not a handful of earth is virgin and untouched, in the lack of better ministries to its desire of beauty (p. 85).

To a certain extent preserved from the most detrimental aspects of city life and alien to moral prejudice, the child can learn how to appreciate beauty even in the suburban environment, either in the colour patterns of the architecture that emerge through the foggy air or – and the flower imagery returns – in the sudden appearance of golden dandelions 'at the road-side'. Going against a long-established literary and cultural tradition which posits children as true natural creatures and glorifies wilderness as the most authentic source of inspiration, Pater shows how the urban environment may also provide fertile ground for the aesthetic refinement.

Pater's opinion was not shared by all his contemporaries. John Ruskin, the Victorian champion of the ecological tradition that stems from Wordsworth,[12] was notoriously hostile towards modern industrialised cities, 'to the rest of the world what the larder and cellar are to the private house', and deprecated the 'ghastly houses' of their suburbs in his essay 'The Study of Architecture in our Schools' (1865).[13] While Ruskin contends that the modern city 'destroys the possibility of art'[14] and stifles any aesthetic arousal, the urban environment depicted by Pater throws the child into a positive 'imaginative mood' and marks him with 'a kind of comeliness and dignity, an urbanity literally, in modes of life, which he connected with the pale people of towns, and which made him susceptible to a kind of satisfaction in the trimness and well-considered grace of certain things and persons' (p. 85). The same graceful 'urbanities' reappear in *Marius the Epicurean*, where the contact of the protagonist with the 'old town of Pisa' causes his first sensual turmoil and, as the red hawthorn did for the child, makes him aware 'of the reality, the tyrannous reality, of the things visible'.[15]

Irreducible to a nature-centred ideal of landscape such as that described by Jonathan Bate, the representation of the environment in 'The Child in the House' is consonant with more integrated approaches to the subject of literary ecology, such as Ashton Nichols's 'urbanatural roosting', a model that emphasises a less rigid separation 'between cities and the wilderness' and 'recognizes close ties between

---

[12] For which see chiefly Jonathan Bate, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991).
[13] Quoted in Philip Mallett, 'The City and the Self', in *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael Wheeler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 44.
[14] Mallett, p. 46.
[15] Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by Michael Levey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), pp. 60-62.

those who live within the city limits: in the suburbs, the small towns, rural areas'.[16] Nichols's perspective is even more relevant to Pater's depiction of aesthetic development in that it observes how 'many of the great "nature" poems of the Romantic era were actually written' – almost an echo of 'The Child in the House' – 'in suburbs, in the back gardens of great cities'.[17]

The synthesis of nature and artificiality reoccurs in 'Emerald Uthwart', although in a less optimistic way. Gardens and flowers loom large in the whole narrative, with Emerald himself associated, to the '*flos parietis*' (p. 242), the wall-flower of Florian Deleal's house (p. 85), a perfect symbiosis of human architecture and vegetal growth. Emerald was born and raised among the verdant Sussex lands, from a long lineage of gardeners – scholars have linked the Uthwarts to the Tradescants, the prominent seventeenth-century family of gardeners and importers of exotic plants (pp. 240-241, note 7). He leaves this planted landscape of 'velvety fields' (p. 241), a Sargentesque 'native world of soft garden touches, carnation and rose' (p. 243), to begin his education at ancient school in Canterbury.[18] Even though the school's milieu is initially seen, probably through Emerald's first reaction to it, as a hard 'world of grey stone', it is nevertheless depicted as a venerable 'place of 'great matters', great stones, great memories out of reach' (p. 243) whose strong '*genius loci*' is almost mythopoeic (p. 246): the narrator compares its influence on the protagonist to the Spartan '*ascêsis*' (p. 247), a practice particularly dear to Pater. The simple sight of the students in the school premises is able to 'harmonise present with past' (p. 244). As the green

---

[16] Ashton Nichols, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. xviii.
[17] Nichols, p. xviii.
[18] I am hinting at John Singer Sargent's famous picture 'Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose' (1885-1886). For a discussion of this painting, and of Sargent's floral imagery in its cultural context, see Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), especially pp. 156-171.

universe of his childhood – to which he tragically returns at the end of this quasi-nihilistic story – the stony world of Canterbury proves equally fundamental to the fate of the enigmatic Emerald[19].

If in 'The Child in the House' the crucial role of the urban environment in the aesthetic development of the protagonist may be slightly downplayed by the mention of the 'lack of better ministries' to its fulfilment (p. 85), in 'An English Poet' pure and traditional wilderness is unequivocally dismissed as adverse to the creative mind.[20]

As with the other two texts that I have examined, this narrative also opens on a thriving natural scene, the sunny French district of the Pays de Caux, where every farm 'is isolated by the outer world by a dense enclosure of trees' and 'there is room for a garden also' (p. 101). After his mother died giving birth to him, the 'languid child' goes 'early away to be reared in the braver air of its English relations among the stern Cumberland mountains' (p. 103). Here he suffers from a violent kind of cultural seclusion; the mountainous landscape, which visitors to the Lake District traditionally idealise, is a hostile 'barrier' to the sensitive souls who dwell there:

> For in these scenes, however beautiful, there are, over and above, those absolutely suffering, under whose windows we pass so ignorantly, waiting there so longingly for the reliever who comes not, those who in full possession of their powers are in some sense bondmen there, those for whom the beautiful restful valley is but the barrier which shuts them from a possible happier field they know or dream of for the exercise of gifts felt slumbering within them. The solemn girdle of hills which seem to raise our jaded thoughts to themselves for a moment, does but shut them off from opportunity, from the city, the

[19] See Benedetta Bini, 'Genius loci', pp. 194-202 and William F. Shuter, 'The Arrested Narrative of "Emerald Uthwart"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45 (1990), 1-25.

[20] For an analysis of the narrative see Benedetta Bini, 'Alle origini del ritratto' (with reference to the mountainous landscape and its effect on the protagonist) and Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater*, pp. 277-290.

> university, the brave gathering place of art, where the business of the mind is done, and the sacred fire is kept up whence their minds also might take sacred fire (p. 103).

Untouched nature – the 'secluded valleys' of the essay on Wordsworth[21] – is here portrayed as a 'place of exile or punishment' (p. 104), whereas the cultured urban environment represents the shrine of 'the sacred fire' of Art. Such an emphasis on cosmopolitan artificiality against the immaculate Romantic scenery is characteristic of many French – and later English – post-Romantic poetics, all of them influential on Pater and resonant in the Anglo-French story of 'An English Poet', from the Parnassian cult of verse form to the Baudelairian *surnaturalisme*, which dreams of banning 'Le végétal irrégulier'[22]. Even the poet and critic John Addington Symonds (1840-1893), a British contemporary of Pater, both recognized and to a certain extent shared this condemnation of the brisk mountainous environment when, speaking of *Marius the Epicurean*, he stated that he would appreciate the style of the book better in the refined Venetian lagoon rather than in the Swiss valley where he was sojourning, a place polluted, as it were, by the 'larger air of the mountains, where everything is jagged & up & down & horribly *natural*'.[23]

Not only does the narrator deplore the 'horribly' natural landscape, he also dwells on mocking the innocent ardour of its advocates. The hard and dreary Cumberland

---

[21] *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, p. 132.

[22] The quotation is from Baudelaire's poem 'Rêve parisien'. See Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes I*, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 101. See also his 1853-1854 letter to Fernand Desnoyers: 'je suis incapable de m'attendrir sur les végétaux […]. J'ai même toujours pensé qu'il y avait dans la Nature, florissante et rajeunie, quelque chose d'impudent et d'affligeant'. See Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance I*, ed. by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 248. For a concise introduction to Baudelaire's idea of *surnaturalisme* see Claude Pichois and Jean-Paul Avice, *Dictionnaire Baudelaire* (Tusson: Du Lérot, 2002), pp. 449-451. For the influence of Baudelaire and other French post-Romantic poetics on Pater see chiefly Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater*, pp. 113-160; Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 77-139 and John Conlon, *Walter Pater and the French Tradition* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1982), pp. 17-135.

[23] Catherine Maxwell, p. 133.

of the young aesthete is contrasted, from the very start, with its majestic appearance in the eyes of those visiting 'some celebrated spot among the mountains, Swiss or English even, to admire the deep lake or the precipice with its rose at twilight' (p. 103), travellers that may be identified with William Wordsworth or John Ruskin (both of them are alluded to among the protagonist's formative readings, the latter as 'the master of imaginative prose who might seem to bear on his single shoulders the whole Alpine world', pp. 108-109). Ironically, the enthusiastic travellers walk the region only in the clement summer weather, even then often 'shuddering' at its coldness, and candidly ignore that not all the inhabitants are at ease with their 'hard mechanical existence' (p. 104). 'I never visit these places' without feeling their misery (p. 104), is, on the contrary, the narrator's sour and surprisingly open confession (the bold first person pronoun strongly evidencing his own and, possibly, the author's opinion). Like the narrator, the young poet is afflicted by 'the really dominant note of mere inclemency in a scenery supposed by summer visitors simply grand' (pp. 104-105).

Strange though it may seem, this satirical corrosion of the mountainous environment presents, at least superficially, several analogies with Ruskin's 'The Mountain Gloom', the penultimate chapter of *Modern Painters, IV* (1856). In this chapter, Ruskin tears down the stereotypical glossy picture of the Alpine villages, by exposing and investigating with a disenchanted gaze the peculiar suffering which occasionally infects their inhabitants. As with 'An English Poet', the essay ridicules both the naive traveller 'on his happy journey' through those isolated districts and the 'poetically minded' intellectuals 'in London or Paris': deluded by their hypocritical utopia of a 'happy life led by peasants' and chasing the chimera of a

primeval and peaceful 'fellowship of the human soul with nature', they fail to perceive 'that gloomy foulness that is suffered only by torpor, or by anguish of soul', an endemic psychophysical disease.[24] While Ruskin speculates that this local gloom is apt to plague only sufficiently 'intellectual' and sensitive individuals,[25] and indeed mentions the absence of books among the privations of the villagers, his 'proto-ethnographic approach' differs widely from Pater's narrative focus on the growth of a singular artistic mind.[26] Ruskin argues that the mountainous environment may, among other symptoms, cause an impairment in its inhabitants' appreciation of beauty, ranging from absolute insensitivity to an unnatural' perception of the sublime.[27] Less concerned with this alleged pathology than with the crueller fate of those who, conversely, 'are in full possession of their power', Pater stresses that there cannot be any aesthetic fulfilment in that 'physical hardness' (p. 104). The poet's artistic faculties are not originally compromised by the environment, but his tragedy consists in their not being able to fully blossom in the place where he is forced to live. In 'An English Poet', even the purely aesthetic value of the 'beautiful' mountainous landscape, which is never questioned in Ruskin,[28] is disparaged through the

---

[24] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters IV*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904), pp. 388, 390.
[25] John Ruskin, p. 405.
[26] Emma Sdegno, 'The Alps', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 43.
[27] Ruskin's discussion of this morbid recognition of beauty occasionally resembles some of Pater's aesthetic formulations: 'the corpse, borne with the bare face to heaven, is strewn with flowers; beauty is continually mingled with the shadow of death'. See John Ruskin, p. 396. While the first part of this passage chimes with the description of Emerald Uthwart's corpse covered by flowers, the second is strikingly similar to the typically Paterian association of beauty and death as expressed both in Pater's essay 'Aesthetic Poetry ('the sense of death and the desire of beauty', p. 198) and in 'The Child in the House' ('for with this desire of physical beauty mingled itself early the fear of death' p. 93).
[28] Before concluding the book with 'The Mountain Glory' chapter, Ruskin ends his exceptionally tentative discourse on 'The Mountain Gloom' with a strongly religious note. He explains the possible coincidence, in the mountainous landscape, of the 'perfection of beauty' and the 'extreme of ugliness (John Ruskin, p. 409) as a postlapsarian condition where 'no good or lovely thing exists in this world without its correspondent darkness'. See John Ruskin, p. 416. It goes without saying that such view of the world is incompatible with Pater's.

impressions of the protagonist: the clichéd 'rose after sunset' on the rocky peaks is nowhere sublime and in no way changes their arid monochrome; the lake, instead of fantastically blending with the sky above, is seen as 'a little wanting in celestial blueness'; the streets of the village are repellently 'sunless' (p. 104)[29].

It is in this light that we should also reconsider what is both the emblem of this narrative and the enduring stylistic ideal of its protagonist, the 'metal honeysuckle' (p. 111) embodying the only two things the poet liked in his little town – the red honeysuckle 'over the gateway of the grange', an 'exotic from France' (105), and the metal screen work of the old church. This floral image, which is the synthesis of the many dichotomies of the story – and, more generally, of Pater's work – ('sweetness-strength', 'female-male', 'soft-hard', 'taste/smell-touch' and the more linguistic opposition 'Romance-Anglo-Saxon', [p. 28, Introduction]), also symbolises the unique blend of nature and culture as expressed in the natural and the urban environment. By de-idealising Romantic pantheism and yet eschewing Ruskin's moralism, by compounding, as Harold Bloom says, 'the idealistic naturalism with a corrective materialism',[30] Pater subverts the Romantic ecological tradition: his flowers are indeed artificial, but their remnant organicism is nevertheless essential

---

[29] It is not by chance that Kenneth Daley begins his monograph on Pater and Ruskin (which remains the only one on the subject) by mentioning this anecdote: 'Walter Pater's early biographer, A. C. Benson, reports that Pater used to pretend that he shut his eyes when crossing the Alps so as not to see those "horrid pots of blue paint", his standard epithet for the Swiss lakes'. See Kenneth Daley, p. 1. For the relationship between the two authors see also Harold Bloom, 'Introduction: The Crystal Man', in *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. by Bloom, pp. vii-xxxi; Franco Marucci, 'Ruskin, Pater e il Rinascimento sfaccettato', in *The Dominion of Daedalus*, ed. by. Jeanne Clegg and Paul Tucker (Hertfordshire: Brentham Press, 1994), pp. 130-142; Robert Keefe, '"Apollo in Picardy": Pater's Monk and Ruskin's Madness', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 29 (1986), 361-370; Laurel Brake, 'Degrees of Darkness: Ruskin, Pater and Modernism', in *Ruskin and Modernism*, ed. by Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 48-66 and John Paul Riquelme, 'Between two worlds and beyond them: John Ruskin and Walter Pater', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Camrbidge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 125-136.

[30] Harold Bloom, p. xv.

for the growth of that 'crystal' form of subjectivity which, once fused with the most brilliant products of human culture, can lead a to 'regeneration of the world'.[31]

[31] The quotation is from Pater's earlier essay 'Diaphaneitè' (p. 82).

CHAPTER 3

Spinning Floral Shapes: Arthur Symons's Flower Images

1. Impressions of Blossoms

Forming part of the collection *Images of Good and Evil* (1900), which includes some of the most typical examples of Arthur Symons's Yeats-inflected Symbolism, 'The Chimaera' stages a dialogue between the poetic 'I' and his insatiable state of want, here reified as the titular mythical creature and apostrophised as a seemingly charming 'white angel'.[1] In the poem, which is clearly reminiscent both of the conversation between the sphynx and the chimera in Gustave Flaubert's *La Tentation de saint Antoine* (1874), and of its reworking in that bible of Decadence that is J. K. Huysmans's novel *A rebours* (1884), the speaker's inevitable relapse into an uneasy state of craving is prophesied by the monster as a kind of climate change.[2] The passage opens with a metaphor involving flowers: 'Then shall the dusk of that shadowy air | […] | Blossom in white-rose flame for you'.[3] What is observable in these lines, which liken the rapid diffusion of rosy light in the gloomy atmosphere to the blossoming of bright blooms, is typical of Symons's treatment of flowers. Indeed, his poetry frequently capitalises on flower images in order to represent luminous (and at times supernatural) apparitions, ephemeral play of light, as well as, more in general, people, objects, and landscapes (or skyscapes), all of which are fragmented

---

[1] Arthur Symons, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: Heinemann, 1899 [1900]), p. 55.

[2] See Symons's comment on Odilon Redon's design for Flaubert's passage in his essay on the French painter. Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918), pp. 257-258.

[3] Symons, *Images*, pp. 50-51.

into almost abstract and subtly nuanced patches of colour. This pictorial type of flower imagery occurs in 'By Lough-na-gar (Green Light)', which is part of the same collection as 'The Chimaera'. Here the tranquillity of the natural scenery, a glade so intensely green as to be almost self-lit, evokes the dazzling vision of legendary cities (the poem was inspired by the waterfalls near Glencar that Symons and Yeats visited during their tour of Ireland in 1896):

> Here, in the ancient place
> Of peace, where old sorrows seem
> As the half-forgotten face
> Of flower-bright cities of gold
> That blossom beyond the height
> Seems in the earth-green light
> That is old as the earth is old.[4]

Symons's painterly use of flower images – which is conversant with similar deployments of the trope in other late nineteenth-century poets and writers, and overlaps with the (post-)Romantic poetic association between fire and blossoms that we noted in the previous chapter – should be seen against the well-known Impressionism of his writings, manifesting in his tension towards rendering in words fleeting phenomena, transitory yet highly stimulating perceptions, and momentary states of mind.[5] In this sense, it is no wonder that this floral motif is first evident in Symons's *Silhouettes* (1892; 2nd edition 1896), his second collection and first

---

[4] Symons, *Images*, p. 149. For Yeats and Symons's trip see Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 148-149.

[5] For Symons's Impressionism see chiefly Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', in Arthur Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (London: MHRA, 2017), pp. 5-14; Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian 'Fin de Siècle'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 214-217; Nicholas Freeman, 'Symons and Whistler: The Art of Seeing', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais, J. and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 16-22 and Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 89-146.

Impressionistic effort. This primarily ocular conception of flowers fits in nicely with the visually-focused and minimalistic Impressionism of *Silhouettes*, where Symons's impressionistic mode, although somewhat perfected in his following book of verse, is probably at its purest. For example, in the last line of 'Impression', the epiphany of a 'miraculous rose of gold' encapsulates the chromatic palette of the whole poem. The tint of the flower captures the 'rosy-golden glow' of artificial light that in the first stanza surrounds the made-up face of a woman and her 'pink and black' attire – the rapidly-sketched interior here is probably a poetic equivalent of the home of the music-hall performer Minnie Cunningham –, while at the same time it may also evoke the equally yellowish and pink shades of the sky outside ('Outside […] | The London Sunday faded slow').[6] Significantly, although it obviously metaphorises a luminous phenomenon, the image of the blossom, which is introduced by a shift in tense from past to present that emphasises its immediacy, is nevertheless rather mysterious: 'Ah what is this? What wings unfold | In this miraculous rose of gold?' (47). The fact that the head of the noun phrase 'rose of gold' may refer both to a flower and to one of the dominant colours of the scene somewhat curbs the emblematic power of the metaphor, which seems to constantly pun on the colour-related meaning of the term and thus does not fully avail itself of the source domain of flowers. Moreover, this figurative haziness, far from being clarified, is dramatically increased by the linguistic context. Indeed, the poem's laconic reference to mysterious 'wings' which 'unfold' in (or within) a flower-like pattern of coloured lights is very obscure: it may indicate the manifestation of an angelic creature as the apex of the speaker's impressionistic experience – the following poem in the

[6] Arthur Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (London: MHRA, 2017), p. 47. Further page references appear in parentheses.

collection is, perhaps not coincidentally, 'An Angel of Perugino', and the adverb 'miraculously', like the nouns 'church-bell' and 'Sunday', has heavenly connotations –, but it may also, although less plausibly, evoke a part of the flower (flowers too 'unfold').

Even though it is only latent in 'Impression', the metaphorical association between blossoms, radiant female faces, and makeup – particularly the reddish powder on their cheeks – is fairly frequent in Symons's *Silhouettes* – where the female body is often dematerialised into a spectral face – and *London Nights*, especially in those poems written at the same time as those included in the former collection. Of all flowers, the rose is the most suited for this purpose both on account of its conventional association with women and beauty, and because of its colours, which may resemble the skin tone as well as the pink and red shades of cosmetics. This may be observed in the much-dissected poem 'Pastel', which records how a female face, lit by the flashing of cigarette-light, suddenly appears in the darkness of a 'little room' (p. 45). The charm of the visage is imagistically likened to a rose:

> And then, through the dark, a flush
> Ruddy and vague, the grace –
> A rose – of her lyric face (p. 45).[7]

If in 'Pastel' it is unclear whether the 'ruddy' complexion of the flower-like face is enhanced by any cosmetics, the association between blossoms and makeup is evident in 'Maquillage', where the 'creamy white and rose' hues of an attractively made-up

---

[7] For a reading of the poem see Marion Thain, *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism: Forms of Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 144-146 and Veronica Alfano, *The Lyric in Victorian Memory: Poetic Remembering and Forgetting from Tennyson to Housman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017), pp. 249-250.

face are compared to a 'flower of dawn', a rather imaginative phrase that captures the magenta and golden lights of sunrise as a flower (p. 47).

Despite its greater focus on carnality when compared to the preceding collection, *London Nights* offers some remarkable examples of Symons's predominantly visual flower images. In 'Behind the Scenes: Empire' the 'gusty gaslight' in the backstage of the titular West-End music hall flickers over the painted faces of the dancers, which are now 'rouged to the colour of the rose' (p. 99), whereas in another theatre poem, 'At the Foresters', the speaker notices, in a rather Swinburnean phrase, how the alluring freshness of his romantic interest seems to 'Mock the mock roses' of her face, almost as if to ridicule the superfluity and inappropriateness of her makeup (p. 101). 'Serata di Festa', a more meditative piece probably composed during Symons's trip to Venice in spring 1894, pays homage to the nocturnal aura of the Venetian lagoon by likening the starlight that falls on the city to a fading bloom ('The beauty of the starlight dies | Over the city, as a flower | Droops) (p. 117).

As we have seen from the examples at the beginning of this paragraph, this connection between (atmospheric) lights and blossoms may be encountered also in Symons's later works. In 'Opals', another poem from *Images of Good and Evil*, the poetic 'I' emblematises his soul as a 'cloudy, flaming opal ring' and compares the glimmering colours of the gem to his passionate 'red heart', and to different natural scenery and light: for example, the dark violet light of midnight is characterised as 'night's purple flower of noon'.[8] Similarly fiery shades flare in the John Martinesque landscape depicted in 'Stormy Night: Naples', a poem collected in *Knave of Hearts, 1894-1908* (1913):

---

[8] Arthur Symons, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Roger Holdsworth (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 55.

> The hill of fire obscure continually
> Flowered to a rose, that flickered, and was gone.
>
> All night I heard the wind go to and fro,
> Scattering the petals of that rose of flame.[9]

The sudden nocturnal ejection of smoke and volcanic fragments from Mount Vesuvius is figured as a rose whose burning petals are scattered by the tempestuous wind all night long, until the coming of dawn – once again imagined as a flower. Incidentally, Symons visited Naples in 1897, during a period when the volcano was apparently active, although in his account of the trip later included in *Cities* (1903) he does not mention such an apocalyptic episode, but merely records how 'whenever you climb, by stairways or winding terraces, to a certain height, you see on the east the double ridge of Vesuvius, smoke coiling into clouds above the crater, its sides, in clear weather, spotted with white houses, in dull weather an indistinguishable mass of violet or purple, like the colour of thunder-clouds'.[10]

Even though Symons recanted his (mainly visually-driven) past aestheticist conception of nature in favour of a more holistic approach to the living world in some programmatic pieces of the collection *A Fool of the World and Other Poems* (1906), we may find traces of his specifically 'optical' floral imagery even in this collection, a clear proof that this trope remained structural to his verse throughout the various phases of his poetics.[11] 'Harvest Moon' represents the fading 'rose-grey shade' of the

---

[9] Arthur Symons, *Knave of Hearts, 1894-1908* (London: William Heinemann, 1913), p. 34.
[10] Arthur Symons, *Cities* (London: J. M. Dent, 1903), p. 95. For the activity of Mount Vesuvius through history see the online record: <http://www.ov.ingv.it/ov/en/catalogo-1631-1944.html> [accessed 2 June 2020]. For Symons's visit to Naples see Beckson, *Arthur Symons*, pp. 165-167.
[11] For a discussion of *A Fool of the World and Other Poems* see Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 125-142.

sky at the end of twilight as 'a petal of sunset, absolute rose', whereas the slightly mythological 'Hymn to Fire' apostrophises the titular element as the 'spectre of the rose', an expression that refers almost exclusively to the flaming dye of the flower – its chromatic essence, as it were – and may be thus read as a purely ocular equivalent of the floral ghost of Théophile Gautier's poem 'Le spectre de la rose'.[12] In 'The Passing', which pivots on blossoms as a traditional symbol of the fleetingness of life, the speaker remarks how 'the crocuses in grass, | Like little flames of gold flicker and pass'.[13] These lines draw on the common poetic association between crocuses and fire – a few Victorian examples of which we have mentioned in the previous chapter – but, as opposed to Symons's poems analysed so far, here it is flowers that are compared to golden flames, instead of the other way around. This reversal may be linked to his new poetics of nature.

2. Flowers of Sex

In Symons's semi-autobiographical short story 'A Prelude to Life', an impressionistic first-person record of 'the formative years of a rootless, largely self-educated aesthete and would-be writer before his literary career begins in earnest',[14] the narrator notices how an excess of solipsism had led his infant self to be 'but imperfectly conscious of more than a very few things in the external world'.[15] He confesses that,

---

[12] Arthur Symons, *A Fool of the World and Other Poems* (London: William Heinemann, 1906), pp. 38, 84. Gautier's poem is included in his *La comédie de la mort* (1838) and inspired many balletic adaptations in the course of the century.
[13] Arthur Symons, *A Fool*, p. 20.
[14] See Nick Freeman's introductory note to the short story in Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (London: MHRA, 2017), p. 117.
[15] Symons, *Spiritual*, p. 124.

although he lived in the country, he 'never was able to distinguish oats from barley, or an oak from a maple' and, most importantly here, that he 'never cared for flowers, except slightly for their colour' when he 'saw many of them growing together'.[16] Given their apparently autobiographical dimension, these reminiscences attest to Symons's visual conception of flowers that we have examined above and thus reinforce our interpretation of his colour-related floral imagery. Blossoms seem, at best, merely to appeal to the curious eyes of the sensation-hungry aesthete, who perceives them only as attractive patterns of colours. Nevertheless, although this may be true for the protagonist of his narrative, even a rapid census of Symons's verse suggests that this is only partially true for his poems, where flowers often work as metaphors for material things rather than ephemeral surfaces of colour. Indeed, in the overtly eroticised poems of *London Nights* blossoms often epitomise the intoxicating sensuality of the female body, here touched and directly experienced by the speaker. In addition to metaphorising atmospheric lights and the painted cheeks of dancers, in this collection flowers are much more frequently substituted for far more sexualised parts of the body on account of their tactile and, in a few notable cases, olfactory characteristics. This combination of pictorial and palpably physical uses of floral imagery is beautifully exemplified by the poem 'Paris '. While the poem's subjective and idealised fresco of the French capital seems to echo the impressionistic mode of *Silhouettes* in the first stanza – where, as with 'Maquillage', the phrase 'flower of dawn' is used to describe the morning light –, the last stanza focuses on the carnality of roses in order to epitomise how 'every woman' of the city is eager to offer her soft body to the speaker:

[16] Symons, *Spiritual*, p. 124.

> And every woman with beseeching eyes,
> Or with enticing eyes, or amorous,
> Offers herself, a rose […] (p. 137).

Analogously, the metrically-experimental 'At the Stage-Door', which captures phantasmagorical female faces as they 'flicker and veer' under the dark 'archway' of a theatre, combines – in the same line – the chromatic (and fairly innocent) detail of the 'rose-leaf cheeks' of the speaker's beloved with the image of her 'flower-soft lips', which, instead, draws exclusively on the haptic qualities of blossoms (pp. 96-97).

As with his purely visual flower images, in these examples roses are again Symons's flowers of choice in that they evoke not only the pinkish colour of the skin and the redder tints of lips – whether artificially rouged or not –, but also the velvety softness of these highly eroticised body parts. Indeed, lips are almost always typified as roses in *London Nights* and, as noted by Marion Thain, this very traditional literary metaphor constitutes a 'powerful intertextual association in Symons's work' more generally.[17] In the utterly physical 'Benedictine' – the second poem of *Bianca*, *London Nights*'s intense last section – the speaker's kiss on the liqueur-stained lips of his beloved is figured as 'a bee that sips | A fainting roseleaf flushed with rains' (p. 140). Similarly, a closed female mouth that is cruelly indifferent to the 'flood of kisses' of the poetic 'I' is described as 'a false and phantom rose' in 'Bianca', the opening poem of the eponymous section (p. 139). The neo-Elizabethan first stanza of 'Caprice', which follows the long-established poetic convention of likening the parts of the female visage to flowers, portrays the face of the speaker's beloved as an arrangement of violets and roses in which Cupid playfully lurks:

[17] Thain, p. 148.

> Her mouth is all of roses,
> Her eyes are violets;
> And round her cheek at hide and seek
> Love plays among the roses
> That dimple on her cheek (p. 94).[18]

In the decidedly Decadent monologue 'Wine of Circe' the poetic 'I' perceives how the rose-like kissing lips of the mythical sorceress 'reddens to a rose of fire, | That sinks and wavers, odorously, nigher' (p. 145). The fatal voluptuousness of the imminent kiss is emphasised through the merging of different sensorial stimuli: while the reference to fire has both a visual and, especially, a tactile dimension (as is specified later in the poem her 'lips burn | like living fire'), the pulsation of the flower-like mouth is linked to its wafting scent – this may be an allusion to the 'odour' of Circe's breath, especially since Symons explicitly fantasises on a similar smell in 'Benedictine'. The eye-catching hues of flowers, and their carnal texture and scent coalesce also in 'Morbidezza', one of the few fully erotic poems of *Silhouettes*. In the first two lines the snow-white flesh of the beloved is characterised as 'lilies | Grown 'neath a frozen moon', an image which opens the poem with an aura of chastity – snow and lilies are common emblems of chasteness, and the moon is a traditional attribute of the virgin goddess Diana (p. 46). Nevertheless, such undertones of purity are immediately contrasted, in the same stanza, with the ecstatic pose of the girl ('The rapture of your swoon'), and this antithesis between sex and innocence informs the whole poem. The 'virginal' white nudity of the woman, which is fleetingly revealed through her clothes – or possibly even just imagined by the poetic 'I' –, is likened to

[18] See my Introduction for this literary commonplace.

an uncorrupted 'bed of lilies' that is jealously protected from the speaker's sight, but whose inebriating aroma ('The alluring scent of lilies') stirs his libido (p. 46). In this sense, if it is evident that in the poem the sense of smell 'acts as a synaesthetic expression of tactile desires',[19] this is mainly due to Symons's careful handling of flower imagery, whose sensorial richness is here fully exploited. Evidently, the perceptual shift from smell to touch is fostered by the common involvement of both senses in the chain of floral metaphors.

Another example of innovative synesthetic intersection between flowers and fragrances is in 'Peau d'Espagne', a poem published in *Knave of Hearts, 1894-1908*, but written in 1896, whose title refers to a sensual and penetrating fragrance which became popular in the late nineteenth century and was often said to resemble the odour of women's skin.[20] This leathery perfume ('scent of sex'), which is the key image of the poem, brings back to the speaker the memories of past erotic encounters, but evokes also 'sex itself and the sexual scent of woman'.[21] Quite tellingly, it is floral imagery that assists the metaphor of scent to represent the female genitalia, which are characterised as 'the flower's heart of the unseen lips' (p. 179).

As exemplified in the last two poems, Symons's verse often deploys floral imagery in order to epitomise not merely female faces, but the female body in its sensual fullness. In the proto-Cubist 'Mauve, Black, and Rose', collected in *London Nights*, the momentary appearance of the speaker's beloved – who may be identified with the Parisian prostitute to whom the poem is dedicated – is perceived as a hypnotic sequence of three colours:

[19] Thain, p. 133.
[20] See Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 270.
[21] Maxwell, p. 271.

Mauve, black, and rose,
The veils of the jewel, and she, the jewel, a rose.

First, the pallor of mauve,
A soft flood flowing about the body I love.

Then, the flush of the rose,
A hedge of roses about the mystical rose.

Last, the black, and at last
The feet that I love, and the way that my love has passed (p. 114).

As Kostas Boyiopoulos has recently pointed out, Symons himself gave a sort of interpretation of this highly stylised poem when he claimed in his posthumously published memoirs that in the text 'every image used is symbolical of some of the things she [the woman] wore and of parts of her body'.[22] Despite this fundamental suggestion, however, the poem's subtly modulated polysemy, imagistic concision and pervasive nominal style – only two finite verbs occur in the whole text, both in subordinate clauses – make it impossible to decipher the speaker's kaleidoscopic vision in too univocal a way and rather create a sense of Symbolist estrangement. While the word 'veils' and the phrase 'soft flood flowing about the body' should be unequivocally interpreted as actual references to clothes – a hypothesis which, as we have seen, is corroborated by Symons himself –, the succession of mauve – a synthetic dye that was very fashionable at the time –, rose, and black is more complex to explain in that the three colours may be read as metonymies for three different layers or parts of the woman's garment, but at the same time the last two shades may be also, and perhaps more convincingly, seen as alluding to her cheeks

[22] Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 93.

and hair, and, arguably, also to a more explicitly erotic set of references. In this sense, it seems plausible to assume that both these sets of meanings are simultaneously conveyed by Symons's zeugmatic Impressionism, especially since he himself specified that every image of the poem hints at the woman's clothes *and* at her body parts. And yet, although this figurative ambivalence permeates the whole lyric, it is rather evident, even at a first reading of the text, that at the core of the speaker's psychedelic vision is his beloved's 'body' and – what matters most here – that this body is visualised as a flower. Indeed, the phrase 'the body I love' is one of the few literal expressions of the text, and the metaphorical link between jewels, roses and the female body is easily graspable (as we noted in the previous chapters, gems and buds are often interrelated in literary language, and both have been frequently used to emblematise body parts). By drawing on the long-ingrained symbolism of the rose, 'Mauve, Black, and Rose' typifies the woman as a precious rose surrounded by hedges of lesser roses, a hidden flower that shines, like Salome, through gauzy veils of colour. Moreover, the manifestation of this flower-like body is tinged with sacral (or rather blasphemous) connotations, all of which are linked to the literary commonplace of the rose in the garden: the phrase 'mystical rose', which is one of the commonest titles of the Virgin Mary, is here used to indicate the almost deified (sexual) body of the speaker's beloved and possibly also the mouth of the woman (if we understand the 'hedge of roses' as her rouged cheeks). Along with the fetishistic adoration of her feet in the last line, this sacrilegious detail tinges the poem with an aura of transgressive sensuality.

The dedication of the poem to a prostitute may also add to its floral symbolism. Indeed, the association of blossoms with prostitution follows a long tradition and,

while it may be largely explained as a by-product of the more general connection of flowers with sensuality and caducity, it offers some specific cultural cases. For example, Flora, the Roman deity of flowers and spring, was identified with a rich courtesan in Giovanni Boccaccio's influential *De Mulieribus Claris*, while – at least from the seventeenth century onward, and certainly still in Victorian times – the flower girls that sold blooms in Covent Garden and other parts of London were often equated to prostitutes.[23] In this respect, Alison Syme has interestingly commented on the popularity of names derived from flowers in late Victorian England and pointed out their link to the idea of the 'femme-fleur' as a mix of chastity and sensuousness.[24] By the same token, Jane Desmarais has remarked how the word 'hothouse' may indicate figuratively a brothel.[25] As far as literature is concerned, it will suffice here to note that the metaphor of the rose is integral to the most notorious Victorian poem on prostitution, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's monologue 'Jenny', whose symbolic representation of a rose fallen on the bosom of the titular young prostitute is explicitly quoted in the title of Symons's 'Hesterna Rosa'.[26] As a further sign that Symons was not insensible to these literary and cultural associations we should also mention that 'Flora of the Eden: Antwerp', the poem which immediately follows 'Mauve, Black, and Rose' in *London Nights*, apparently focuses on a prostitute that worked at the Eden Casino in Antwerp and whose name (Flora) is punned on in the title (p. 92, footnote).

---

[23] Beverly Seaton, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), 685-686.
[24] Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-siècle Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), pp. 31, 35.
[25] Jane Desmarais, *Monsters under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), p. 39.
[26] See Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 68.

The symbolic link between roses and the transience of sensual pleasure is explicit in another poem from *London Nights* that is dedicated to a prostitute, 'To Muriel: at the Opera'. The Muriel of the title is Muriel Broadbent, a young girl who became intimate with Symons in the early 1890s after he met her at the Alhambra theatre. Not only her physical attractiveness, but also her innocent shyness and singular intelligence intrigued Symons, who wrote about her in his unpublished prose 'Pages from the Life of Muriel Broadbent' and modelled on her the character of Lucy Newcome, the protagonist of his cycle of narratives on the tragic life of a prostitute.[27] In the poem inspired by Muriel, the sad story of Lucy is almost echoed in the sense of languid resignation that imbues the personification of the first lines. Snuggling between Muriel's breasts, 'roses and rose-buds, red and white' are withering, but, as if entranced by the physical contact with the woman, gladly accept their imminent death (p. 116). Their longing for a quiet demise is nevertheless frustrated by the girl, who plucks 'apart | Petal from petal' in a bid to relish the fading perfume of the flowers to the last whiff (p. 116). While voluptuously kissing some of the freshly plucked rose leaves, Muriel makes a wish that betokens the allegorical dimension of her destructive action: ''Ah!' you said | (With lips that kissed white roses red) | 'To live on love and roses!''. Her compulsive sniffing is symbolic of her desire for a life of intense romance and sensual pleasures, a childish dream that is immediately lampooned by the speaker for its ill-advised vanity: 'Well | But if the rose were Muriel?' (p. 116). The Verlainesque sarcasm of the closing, a typical stylistic trait of Symons's poetry of the early 1890s, substitutes Muriel with the wilting roses she is tearing apart. As with 'Mauve, Black, and Rose', the speaker's beloved is again

---

[27] For Muriel see Symons, *Spiritual*, pp. 57-58 (Freeman's introductory notes).

morphed into a flower, but here in order to emphasise not merely her sensuality, but also and especially the precariousness and waste of her life.

Less erotic floral symbolism is also structural to the poem 'Pattie', collected in *Silhouettes*. The country girl loved by the speaker is apostrophised as a 'daisy', a traditional emblem of innocence. Despite the romantic subject matter, there is no evidence of sexual innuendos in the poem, and it seems that the floral imagery is simply deployed to highlight the candour of the girl and the purity of the speaker's love:

> And so I turn where Pattie stands,
> A flower among the flowers at play;
> I'll lay my heart into her hands,
> And she will smile the clouds away (p. 51).

Conversely, a prurient analogy between blossoms and the shapeliness of the female body is the key trope of 'Roses', a poem included in *Knave of Hearts, 1894-1913*, but written in August 1895, barely few months after the later poems of *London Nights*. The first of the poem's two eight-line strophes represents a 'perfumed garden' of white roses whose 'delicate pale alleys' and 'warm delicious valleys' the speaker has often enjoyed exploring 'for enchanted days' (p. 178). In the second stanza, the speaker first confesses that in the middle of this white garden grow his two favourite roses, which are both 'redder than red roses', and then – in the final couplet – he explains this pervasive vegetal imagery as an insistent allusion to the buxomness of his beloved (p. 178). Symons's flower metaphors are here noticeably physical: the woman's snowy breast is characterised as a 'white-rose garden', while her reddish

nipples stand out as 'rosy-petalled roses' which the speaker delights in kissing (p. 178).

Albeit less graphically than in 'Roses', the flower-like seductiveness of women is captured also in 'At Glan-y-Wern', a poem from *London Nights* which was probably inspired by Symons's trip to a farm near the Welsh town of Llangolen. In the poem we witness a 'sultry' woman dressed in white who, seen at the window, 'flashed into the evening night | The brilliance of her gipsy face' (p. 106). Under the window – which is 'threefold white' as it is made of white 'shutter, glass, and curtain's lace' – climbs 'a red rose' which erotically touches 'the roses' of the woman's mouth. She is covered by 'foliage' and surrounded by sensual blossoms, and thus appears to the poetic 'I' as a vegetal creature, a rare specimen of flower-woman ('Among the flowers herself a flower, | A tiger-lily sheathed in white') (p. 106). 'Tiger-lily' is the common name for several species of the genus *Lilium*, but here most probably indicates *Lilium lancifolium*, which in the nineteenth century was more frequently known as *Lilium tigrinum* or 'tiger-spotted Chinese lily'.[28] This oriental blossom, which is native to China and Japan, has bright orange petals 'with black crimson somewhat raised spots' that may resemble the spotted fur of tigers (hence its name);[29] it was first introduced into Kew Gardens in 1804, and by the turn of the century, when Symons mentioned it in his poem, it had been cultivated in England for almost a century and had become fairly popular.[30] Nevertheless, although it had made its way into literary texts such as Alfred Tennyson's juvenile poem 'A spirit haunt the year's last hour' (first published in 1830) and William Allingham's 'Tiger-lily' –

[28] See the *The British Florist: Or, Lady's Journal of Horticulture* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846), 1, p. 209. WM. E. Payne, *Monograph on Lilium Tigrinum* (Detroit, 1870).
[29] *Curtis's Botanical Magazine; or Flower-Garden Displayed*, 31 (1810), n. 1237.
[30] *Hortus Kewensis* (London: Longman, 1811), II, p. 241.

collected in *Flower Pieces and Other Poems* (1888), the tiger-lily was by no means a conventional poetic flower and it is therefore rather atypical that it was referred to by Symons, who rarely includes specific botanical language or uncommon blossoms in his poetry.[31] In this sense, his unusual choice may have been motivated by the fact that this flower functions as a perfect metaphor for the beautiful gitana sketched in the poem. Indeed, while its exoticism parallels the gypsy ancestry of the girl, its vivid colour constitutes an equivalent of her bronze complexion (which is hinted at by terms such as 'sultry', 'ardent', and 'gipsy', and contrasts with the whiteness of her garment).

Moreover, it is also possible that the exotic nature and peculiar appearance of the tiger-lily may have captivated Symons as highly valuable Decadent qualities. As noted in my Introduction, as a result of their morbid curiosity and adoration of strangeness many late nineteenth-century writers and poets were besotted with exotic and rare plants, which frequently feature in their works. Interestingly, Symons somewhat acknowledged this fin-de-siècle fad for tropical plants and specifically linked it to Decadence. In 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893) – his pioneering account of the latest Anglo-French literary trends – he rapidly comments on the description of Des Esseintes's collection of tropical plants in Huysmans's *A rebours* – possibly the most representative and influential nineteenth-century literary treatment of botanical mirabilia – by noticing how the protagonist of the novel 'delights in strange, unnatural flowers'.[32] Even though it is plausible that Symons

---

[31] A notable exception is the much-dissected poem 'Proem', which opens the section 'Lilian' in *London Nights*. The poem – which plays on the polysemy of flower-related words such as hothouses (also signifying brothels) and 'slips' (indicating both a plant cutting, a stage wing, and 'slender girls') – compares wild violets with orchids (p. 92).

[32] Symons, *Selected Writings*, p. 78.

might have personally embraced this widespread enthusiasm for rare flowers – at least superficially, as a necessary trait of his Decadent persona –, he hardly ever espoused it in his writings, where it is almost impossible to encounter that 'symphonic arrangements of exotic flowers' which Dorian Gray admired in Huysmans's book;[33] indeed, as far as imagery is concerned and with the notable exception of the already mentioned 'Proem' to 'Lilian', in Symons's poetry the sense of Decadent atmosphere is associated with the deployment of fashionable perfume imagery, insistent references to the body, and modern urban erotically-charged landscape rather than with Parnassian exoticism. If some of his flowers might be perceived as unnatural, their strangeness is neither botanical rarity nor mythical alterity, but rather derives from their metaphorical and synesthetic dimension, their luminescence, and their tactile and olfactory carnality.

3. Floral (Bodily) Rhythms

Symons's flower trope arguably reaches its peak in some of his dance-poems, where it contributes to capturing the sensorial (and linguistic) energy of the female body in movement. Tellingly, this set of carefully crafted poems, most of which are included in *London Nights*, played a key role in the mid-twentieth-century critical reassessment of Symons by scholars such as Frank Kermode and Ian Fletcher, and since then it has been discussed, or at least mentioned, in almost every general (and less general)

[33] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 109.

account of his poetry.[34] The historical and literary momentousness of Symons's poetic representation of the dancer was first remarked by Kermode, who selected it as a fin-de-siècle example of what he labelled the 'Romantic Image', a phrase which he coined to designate both a specific aesthetics and its poetic symbolisation. In his view, the master trope of the Image represents the linguistic reification of a set of aesthetic principles which had informed English literature from the end of the eighteenth century to his times, manifesting in works of art characterised by their absence of morally or even emotionally-driven intentionality, by their organicist structure, constitutive ambiguity, and tension towards originality, as well as by their formal and conceptual fusion of outer and inner, soul and body, form and meaning.[35] Late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century poetic images of dance and dancers – such as those of Symons and, especially, Yeats – constitute the most perfect emblem of this phenomenon. Following Kermode's convincing description of the epochal significance of this symbol and its structural connection with High Modernism on the one hand, and the Romantic tradition on the other, Symons's theoretical and poetic treatment of dance has received a relative amount of critical attention, being investigated from cultural, stylistic and interartistic approaches.[36] Yet, despite this (much-needed) scholarly attention to Symons's ballet imagery, the

---

[34] See Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image, with a new epilogue by the author* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1st edn. 1957]), pp. 59-110, 127-140 and Ian Fletcher, 'Symons, Yeats, and the Demonic Dance', *The London Magazine*, 7.6 (1960), 46-60.
[35] Kermode, pp. 52-58.
[36] In addition to Fletcher's and Kermode's studies, see Jan B. Gordon, 'The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons' London Nights', *Victorian Poetry*, 9.4 (1971), 429-443; Heather Marcovitch, 'Dance, Ritual, and Arthur Symons's *London Nights*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56.4 (2013), 462-482; Petra Dierkes-Truhn, 'Arthur Symons' Decadent Aesthetics: Stéphane Mallarmé and the Dancer Revisited', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014), pp. 29-58; Katharina Herold, 'Dancing the Image: Sensoriality and Kinesthetics in the Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Symons', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Desmarais and Condé, pp. 141-161; Lene Østermark-Johansen, 'The Rhythm of Life and Art: Symons and the Interrelationship between Rodin's Sculpture and Modern Dance at the 'Fin de Siècle'', in *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic, Vagabond*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018), pp. 12-29.

frequent and noteworthy intersections of this trope with flower symbolism have been so far relatively neglected. In this section I will try to fill this gap, and show how the discussion of Symons's dance-related flower metaphors may shed new light on his avant-garde conception of dance and therefore on his idea of poetic language.

In two of Symons's dance poems – 'The Primrose Dance: Tivoli' and 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', both composed in 1892 and collected in *London Nights* – flower symbolism is pervasive. Here Symons enriches the visual and tactile qualities of his blossoms with several references to the sense of hearing. As a consequence of this link with rhythm, the flower images of these poems do not merely typify the female body as a flower, but record its metamorphic sensuality, capturing at the same time its carnality, but also how, in Symons's own words, its 'colours change, recombine, before one's eyes' and its 'outlines melt into one another, emerge, and are again lost, in the kaleidoscopic movement of the dance' (p. 197).[37] In these poems blossoms become the signs of a body language, and dance may be almost seen as a special language of flowers based on sheer physical energy rather than on the chaste romanticism of traditional nineteenth-century floral symbolism. (Intriguingly, this combination of sexualisation and an almost Futuristic fragmentation of the body may be regarded as a fin-de-siècle forerunner of later poetic attempts to blend contemplative stillness and living movement, such as those made by Pound and Yeats.)[38]. In 'The Primrose Dance: Tivoli', which is dedicated to the aforementioned Minnie Cunningham, we immediately witness the glitzy transformation of the spinning performer into a flower:

[37] I quote from Symons's article 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations'.
[38] Kermode, p. 102.

> Skirts like the amber petals of a flower,
> A primrose dancing for delight
> In some enchantment of a bower
> That rose to wizard music in the night (p. 100).

These lines perfectly capture the coruscating show of attractive limbs and fancy garments that was typical of fin-de-siècle music-hall performances. The yellowish skirts of the dancer strongly resemble flower leaves and their motion evokes the shape of a nocturnal primrose which appears as if animated by a feeling of 'delight'. The personification of the blossom and the reference to a magical arbour imbue the strophe with a dreamlike atmosphere, but the resemblance of the skirts to petals, although certainly increased by the dance steps and the artificial stage-lights, should be taken quite literally. Symons's association of music-hall dance numbers with blossoms is here more than metaphorical and, far from being exclusively the product of his poetic genius, reflects real choreographic practices of the time, all the more so in that the poem is dedicated to a music-hall entertainer, and its title mentions a specific (if now entirely forgotten) dance as well as a specific and then very fashionable London theatre.

Symons's enthusiastic attendance at music-hall venues such as the Tivoli and his occupation as a reviewer of ballet performances for many popular newspapers are well-known aspects of his biography and explain the absolute topicality of the poem.[39] Indeed, in one of his first reviews of dance shows, which appeared in *The Star* on 20 February 1892, Symons himself provided a lively and illuminating description of the flower-related choreography which he later put into verse. In hailing Minnie Cunningham as a true artist for her invention of a new type of

---

[39] Beckson, pp. 75-77.

dancing, he comments on her signature moves and enthuses on her costume, which was specifically designed to imitate a primrose: 'There is a wheel – reminding one a little of the male dancer's wheel in the ballet – which is quite new in skirt dancing […]. A living primrose, her skirts expand and circle like the petals of the very flower'.[40] For all the technical originality and illusionism of Cunningham's dance, its floral subject matter must have been nonetheless fairly conventional, since, as Alexandra Carter has shown, many late-Victorian music-hall ballets found in nature, and particularly in flowers, their principal source of themes and settings.[41] These performances were habitually set in some kind of natural landscape – whether the countryside, an Italianate aristocratic garden, or mythological Arcadia – and the dancers played the inhabitants of rural or garden scenes; very often, however, they were also 'presented as flowers or other aspects of nature', a 'thematic' choice which made it easy to capture the attention of the audience with 'spectacular colour combinations and groupings of the *corps* as bouquet of flowers'.[42] Caught at the pivoting moment of one such spectacular performance, the danseuse of Symons's poem – obviously a double for the creative Minnie Cunningham – appears as a 'rhythmic flower', a blossom whose petals (her skirts) 'pirouette | In delicate circles' (p. 100).

Just as in his review Symons notices, rather specifically, that Cunningham 'turns with the airy curve of the swallow', so the highly symbolic language of the poem connotes the dancing primrose as seeking to replicate the intricate motion of a bird of

---

[40] Symons's article is included in Jane Pritchard, ''More Natural than Nature, More Artificial than Art': The Dance Criticism of Arthur Symons', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 21.2 (2003), 36-89 (p. 42).
[41] Alexandra Carter, *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)
[42] Carter

the same species (it is 'fain to follow | […] | The mazy dancing of the swallow') (p. 100);[43] in the third stanza the animal and vegetable movements finally fuse into one ('A flower's caprice, a bird's command'), almost as if it the dancer-flower had now morphed into a bird (p. 100). This merging between flying creatures and blossoms is typical of the post-Romantic flower trope, as we noted in the Introduction, but here the topical reference to ballet gives an extra(literary) layer of meaning to this imagery and attests to its intermedial dimension. Indeed, as with the poetic representation of the dancer as a blossom, the metaphorical association of flowers with winged animals was not capitalised upon just by fin-de-siècle literary language, but also by the ballet routines of contemporary music halls, where dancers 'represented not only the natural phenomenon of flowers but also insects, butterflies and birds'.[44] Tellingly, the motif of organic metamorphosis was at the core of the performances of Loïe Fuller (1862-1928), the most innovative music-hall dancer of the time and one of the founding mothers of modern dance. An American, Fuller made a name for herself in her own country first and then in Europe – in London and then primarily in Paris – with a revolutionary style of dancing in which she waived and swept her voluminous silky costume with the aid of hidden bamboo or aluminium canes.[45] Covered by her ever-swirling robe and artificially illuminated by her own patented special lightings, Fuller's human body mutated into protean shapes of insect and flowers. As pointed out by Lene Østermark-Johansen, Fuller's 'transformations of self through dance into butterflies, black moths, lilies, orchids and violets were

---

[43] Pritchard, p. 43.
[44] Carter
[45] See Østermark-Johansen, p. 22-26.

processes of metamorphosis in which the dancer 's body became the animal or flower forms which gave name to her dance'.[46]

Symons celebrated this transformative power of ballet in his article 'At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations', which was published in September 1896 in the short-lived magazine *The Savoy*, which he had been painstakingly directing from its launch at the beginning of the year. In the third part of this first-hand account of the vibrant life behind and before the curtain of a popular music hall in Leicester Square, Symons chronicles the numerous scene changes of the ballet *Aladdin* in a manner that is both documentary and visionary; intriguingly, he refers to the metamorphic serpentine dance – one of Fuller's choreographic numbers (although he does not mention her) – and zooms in on a group of dancers flamboyantly dressed 'in robes that flower into chrysanthemums, and with bent garlands of leaves' (pp. 195-196). The final 'transformation' of the stage setting is recounted in a passage of true prose poetry, where sophisticated shades of colour, and flowery and insectile forms alternate with flashes of electric light and glossy surfaces (the theatre was equipped with a crystal curtain):

> There is another transformation: the diamond garden, with its flowers that are jewels, its living flowers. Colours race past, butterflies in pale blue, curious morbid blue, drowsy browns and pale greens, more white and gold, a strange note of abrupt black. The crystal curtain, a veil of diamonds, falls, dividing the stage, a dancing crowd before it and behind it, a rain of crystals around. An electric angel has an apotheosis; and the curtain falls upon the last grouping (p. 196).[47]

---

[46] Østermark-Johansen, p. 20. For Fuller see also Syme, pp. 15-16; Kermode, 198-202 and Herold, pp. 142-143.

[47] For the curtain see Symons, *Spiritual*, p. 97.

This hallucinatory feast for the eyes may be seen as providing concrete evidence to the rather theoretical conclusion of the essay, in which Symons notes how the art of ballet, although firmly grounded in nature ('the figures of the composition are real'), nevertheless has a 'deliberate air of unreality' and is capable of offering the viewer 'the one escape into fairyland which is permitted by that tyranny of the real which is the worst tyranny of modern life' (p. 197). It is this idea of magical escapism that lies behind the miraculous and ironic reversal of the last stanza of 'The Primrose Dance: Tivoli', where nature is supernaturally regained at the very core of artifice because it is (re)located in the natural – 'flower-like' and avian – body of the dancer:

> So, in the smoke-polluted place,
> Where bird or flower might never be,
> With glimmering feet, with flower-like face,
> She dances at the Tivoli (p. 100).

While 'The Primrose Dance: Tivoli' draws on floral imagery in order to represent a solo performance, 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' uses it to imaginatively describe a grouping of dancers. The title of this much-dissected poem, which Yeats praised as 'one of the most perfect lyrics of our time', refers both to the most famous turn-of-the-century Parisian cabaret and to a very successful French ballerina – Jane Avril (1868-1943), who was nicknamed after a newly patented explosive (the *mélinite*) for her ebullient style of dancing (p. 103, footnote). Much of the text focuses on this maverick entertainer, but its first two stanzas describe the routine of the corps de ballet from which she detaches herself:

> Olivier Metra's Waltz of Roses

Sheds in a rhythmic shower
The very petals of the flower;
And all is roses,
The rouge of petals in a shower.

Down the long hall the dance returning
Rounds the full circle, rounds
The perfect rose of lights and sounds,
The rose returning
Into the circle of its rounds (p. 102).

The *Valse des roses* (the 'Waltz of roses' of the first line) was an extremely popular composition by the French composer and conductor Olivier Métra (1830-1889), indeed a piece so popular as to appeal to the rather unsophisticated musical taste of the character Odette de Crécy in Marcel Proust's 'Un Amour de Swann' (1913).[48] By elaborating on the waltz's connection with blossoms, and deploying a synaesthetic and highly iterative style, Symons's poem visualises a musical and dance performance of Métra's piece as a moving floral pattern.[49] Several commentators have rightly read the first strophe as symbolising the choreography and possibly the flower-like costumes of the dancers, but the image of the cascade of red-rose petals may be also interpreted, more abstractly, as a visual (and rhythmic) equivalent of the tune floating through the hall.[50] Since the term 'waltz' refers both to a type of dance and to a musical arrangement suited for this particular dance, Symons's roses may also stand metaphorically for the music itself and its aesthetic effect on the audience. Whether or not this is the case, it is only after introducing Métra's motif that the poem explicitly concentrates on the dance routine. The second stanza unequivocally likens the circular movement of the ballet to the round shape of a rose and

[48] Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann*, ed. by Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 244.
[49] See Herold, p. 150; Alfano, p. 225 and Boyiopoulos, p. 101.
[50] Boyiopoulos, p. 101-102.

emblematises the spectacle of the dance as a cadenced flower-like ring of auditory and optical impressions ('the perfect rose of lights and sounds').

After this floral bonanza, the rest of the poem is comparatively shorn of blossoms. Presented as 'Alone, apart', the star of the show does not participate in the group choreography. Instead, she dances self-absorbedly in front of a rather uncanny mirror – is it part of the actual scenery or of her 'dream'? – where she contemplates 'Her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace' (p. 102). The reflection of the performance in the looking glass unveils the ghostly nature of the show, which is perceived as a 'dance of shadows', almost an emblem of the mystery and transience of life. Symons's Impressionistic flowers are again used to represent the spectral 'orange-rosy' illumination of the shadow-haunted music hall ('In ruddy flowers of flame that burn/ The lights are trembling') before the poem closes on the solipsism of the ballerina, who, a shadow among shadows, 'dances for her own delight' (p. 102). Her introspective daydream before the mirror has been much commented on as the key element of the poem and, building on Kermode's interpretation of the dancer trope, almost all critics have read it as a symbol of the autonomy and self-referentiality of art.[51] Her hypnotic state of self-contemplation has been linked to the narcissism of the 'performing artist' as well as to the mechanisation and disjointedness of modernity, and it has been read as 'a metaphor for the poet's split self' or, more in general, as a symptom of a typically Decadent dissociative condition.[52]

For all this critical attention to interiority and aesthetic purity, several readings of the poem have also pointed out, or at least touched on, the sensuality of the image of the enrapt performer. In this sense, although I do not agree with Jan B. Gordon's

---

[51] Desmarais and Baldick, 'Introduction', p. 14.

[52] Beckson, p. 86; Marcovitch, pp. 475-476; Boyiopolous, pp. 26-28.

focus on the poetic persona qua spectator of the ballet who fails 'to transcend the status of voyeur of the dancer', his analysis of the poem offers a case in point in that it aptly remarks that – unlike Yeats, who considered dance as synthesis of contraries – Symons viewed dance as a source of primitive anti-egotistical energy, a way of reaching the divine 'through body consciousness'.[53] More recently, both Jane Desmarais and Kostas Boyiopoulos have noticed the 'sensuous embodiment' of the imagery of 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge',[54] and this trace of sensuousness is a fundamental element of the poem, in my opinion, especially if seen against Symons's flower symbolism. Indeed, the poem openly refers to the woman's pleasure, a sense of 'delight' presumably derived from her revelling in and contemplating her unique artistic act, but which is also identified with the drive behind her performance ('She dances for her own delight'). Within the self-reflecting and circular structure of the text, aesthetic creation – the dancer's routine – and aesthetic pleasure – the dancer's delight – are so closely intertwined that it is not clear which comes first.

As well as adding to the unreal atmosphere of the cabaret, this confusion of cause and effect seems to indicate that, if the work of art is autonomous, it is so because it is animated by an inner principle of self-pleasure, an onanistic gratification for its own independence. In this respect, it is interesting to notice that, as opposed to the vast majority of Symons's verse from this period – where the female figures are conventionally characterised as the object of the speaker's desire –, in this poem the feeling of lust is transferred from the speaker to the dancer. Indeed, the speaker of 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' is not simply deprived of his libidinal energy, but appears almost absent, a noteworthy stylistic feature that the poem shares with just

---

[53] Gordon, p. 432.
[54] Boyiopoulos, p. 101.

four other texts of *London Nights*, 'At Carbis Bay', 'Autumn Twilight', 'Behind the Scenes: Empire' and, tellingly, the other flower-related dance-poem 'Primrose Dance: Tivoli'. In both this poem and 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', two pieces which single out the 'delight' of the performer as the origin of the performance, the action of the poetic 'I' is never signalled by first-person pronouns or adjectives – either singular or plural – nor is more subtly alluded to by the presence of a second-person interlocutor. Instead, the restriction to third-person forms conveys an impression of emotional detachment on the part of the speaker, as if the lyric 'I' had been replaced by an omniscient narrator (or rather spectator), making it therefore possible to view the two poems as rather unsentimental descriptions, if visionary and psychologically-focused, of the ballet performances. Moreover, this anti-lyric effect is reinforced by Symons's use of the present tense. A master of Impressionism, Symons frequently deploys the simple present in his verse in order to convey his immediate and highly subjective perceptions and sensations, but in the stylistic context of these poems – which make no reference to the speaking voice – the choice of this tense in lieu of the simple past of individual recollection strongly adds to the sense of impersonality in that the utterance looks indeed imaginative and idiosyncratic, but does not seem to be linked to a specific persona. Because of this invisibility of the poetic 'I', the poems omit any reference to the sentimental relationship between the speaker and the dancer, and, unlike the majority of Symons's coeval verse, do not explore amorous subject matter.

And yet, although there is less insistence on eroticism or romance, sensual fulfilment is evidently central to these texts, which, as I have pointed out above, directly thematise the 'delight' of the performer. While the dancer's pleasure is

explicitly connected with her spiralling body in 'Primrose Dance: Tivoli', the physical basis of this 'delight' is hinted at more obliquely in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', where the introversion of the ballerina, the cross-sensory metaphors between sight and hearing – instead of touch or smell –, and the symbolism of the spectral mirror somewhat curb any overly direct link with carnality. (Interestingly, in his later recollections of Jane Avril's dance number, Symons is much more prurient, choosing to linger rather on her décolleté and air of 'depraved sanctity' than on her 'dreamy absorption' – although it should be noted that the older Symons was much more inclined to such Baudelairean tones than his younger self.)[55] In this respect, and most cogently here, it is fundamental to remark that the ultrasensuality of floral imagery helps to express the physical, or at least sensorial, dimension of both poems: blossoms metaphorise the dancing body in 'Primrose Dance: Tivoli', whereas in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' they epitomise the sensual – indeed bodily, if etherealised – experience of the show. In both poems flower images contribute to an Impressionistic mode that mediates between the two poles of Symons's verse of the early 1890s, on one side, the eroticism typical of *London Nights* – which is usually characterised, although to various degrees, by the personal involvement of the speaker –, on the other the restrained and almost childlike sense of unfulfilled desire that imbues the previous collection *Silhouettes*. In this sense, being body-related, this Impressionism is truly 'phenomenological', to use Marion Thain's felicitous category.[56] Intriguingly, the word 'morbid', which probably constitutes the most direct allusion to the dancer's body in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', is pivotal to Thain's analyses of

---

[55] pp. 212-213. I quote from Symons's article 'Dancers and Dancing', published in the *English Review* in 1915.

[56] Thain, p. 136.

'Morbidezza' and 'Hands', in which she reconnects the adjective to its original tactile connotations.[57]

Blossoms feature as a symbol of the intrinsic sensuousness of dance also in Symons's most insightful theoretical reflections on this art. A perfect example of his innovative dance criticism, 'The World as Ballet' was originally published in periodical form in 1898 and later included in *Studies in Seven Arts* (1906); critics have seen this piece not just as an up-to-the-minute appreciation of the art of dance, but also as a useful illumination of Symons's own poetics. Indeed, the last paragraph of the text directly references human language and unfavourably compares it with balletic expression:

> And something in the particular elegance of the dance, the scenery; the avoidance of emphasis, the evasive, winding turn of things; and, above all, the intellectual as well as sensuous appeal of a living symbol, which can but reach the brain through the eyes, in the visual, concrete, imaginative way; has seemed to make the ballet concentrate in itself a good deal of the modern ideal in matters of artistic expression. Nothing is stated, there is no intrusion of words used for the irrelevant purpose of describing; a world rises before one, the picture lasts only long enough to have been there; and the dancer, with her gesture, all pure symbol, evokes, from her mere beautiful motion, idea, sensation, all that one need ever know of event. There, before you, she exists, in harmonious life; and her rhythm reveals to you the soul of her imagined being.[58]

Almost anticipating Kermode's conclusions, Symons opines that ballet is the quintessence of post-romantic art – here referred to as 'modern' in the late nineteenth-century (and possibly Baudelaire-inflected) sense of the word. In his view, dance attained this distinction on account of its carefully organised form

[57] Thain, pp. 133-135.
[58] Symons, *Selected Writings*, p. 82.

(‘elegance’), its semantic evasiveness, its avoidance of excessive pathos – an increasingly common aesthetic trait at least since Edgar Allan Poe’s poetic theory – and, especially, on account of its ‘living‘ symbolism. Indeed, although it is capable of symbolising, and thus express, ideas and sensations – and therefore possesses an ‘intellectual’ quality –, dance is a decidedly embodied (‘sensuous’) artistic product, a ‘living symbol’ in that it is much alive for the senses of the viewer and is firmly rooted in the body of the performer. Symons insists on the primordial connection of ballet with corporality since the very beginning of the essay, where he remarks, in somewhat Nietzschean tones, that dance ‘is life, animal life’: although it functions as a symbol, the dancer’s moving body – which may be regarded as the semiotic unit of ballet – is nevertheless perceived as a living thing, as something that ‘exists’, physically, before the eyes of the audience.[59] Analogously, the dancer’s ‘rhythm’, which reveals to the spectator the unseen world of her ‘soul’, can be apprehended only through the senses (incidentally, Symons’s choice of the word ‘soul’, which he associated with Symbolism since his first discussion of this literary tendency in ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, betokens the symbolic nature of this shift from physicality to the invisible).[60] By virtue of these aesthetic features, the art of ballet can communicate without the need of ‘words’, in an extremely compact and effective manner that fully satisfies the typical (post-)Romantic tension towards suggestiveness, polysemy, and sensuality.

Symons’s passage is evidently informed by some of Walter Pater’s key aesthetic notions such as the concept of sensorial ‘pulsations’ and the interpenetration of soul and body – a fact which is hardly surprising since Pater’s works were formative for

[59] Symons, *Selected Writings*, p. 80.
[60] Symons, *Selected Writings*, p. 73.

Symons's poetics, as they were so for the entire generation of poets and writers of the 1890s. Moreover, Symons's formulation of the 'living symbol' seems to echo Wordsworth's famous images of the 'living Child' and the 'dancing Shape', whose blend of concreteness and supernaturalism – one of the focal points of Pater's assessment of Wordsworth's poetry – is, intriguingly, also reworked in Yeats's most-accomplished dance-related poem, 'Among School Children' (first published in 1927, then collected in 1928).[61] However, despite the influence of these English antecedents, it is a foreign model, namely Stéphane Mallarmé's treatment of dance, which constitutes the most direct source for Symons's essay. Such illustrious connection has not gone unnoticed to scholars, who have rightly compared Symons's text with Mallarmé's essays 'Ballets' and 'Autre étude de danse. Les fonds dans le ballet'.[62] Indeed, much biographical and textual evidence proves that Symons was conversant with these essays and other dance-related works by Mallarmé. He first met Mallarmé in Paris in 1890, when together with his friend Havelock Ellis he took part in one of the famed *mardis de la rue de Rome*, the Tuesday literary gatherings at Mallarmé's house, and visited him again during his subsequent sojourns in the French capital. Symons enthusiastically acted as a translator and promoter of Mallarmé's oeuvre in England, especially in the second half of the 1890s, and the correspondence between the two poets, which has been partially published, shows Mallarmé's high regard for Symons and his commitment as interpreter of his oeuvre.[63] Well expressed in the seminal *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899),

---

[61] I quote from Wordsworth's 'Lucy Gray', first collected in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) and '*She was a phantom of delight*', first published in 1815. See *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2014), pp. 117, 387.

[62] See Herold; Dierkes-Thrun; Kermode, pp. 84-85.

[63] See Bruce Morris, 'Introduction', in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies Translated by Arthur Symons*, ed. by Bruce Morris (Edinburgh: The Tragara Press, 1986), pp. 3-6; Bruce Morris, 'Mallarmé's Letters to

Symons's profound admiration for Mallarmé's revolutionary if, in his opinion, at times excessively hermetic works emerges also in his positive assessment of Mallarmé's essays on dance, which he mentioned as 'the marvellous, the unique, studies in the symbolism of the ballet' in his review of Mallarmé's collection of prose *Divagations* (1897).[64]

Of all of Mallarmé's reflections on dance in *Divagations*, those included in 'Ballets' were probably the most influential for Symons's aesthetic theory. The essay, which was first published in a slightly different version in *La Revue indépendente* in 1886, initially takes the form of a review of two ballets that debuted in Paris that year, but, as often occurs with Mallarmé's labyrinthine and severely elliptical prose, the few and rather veiled topical references to the shows are used as a springboard for more general aesthetic considerations on the art of dance. As with Symons's 'The World as Ballet', but much more systematically, Mallarmé's text juxtaposes dance with (written) language. However, apart from the fact that for both poets 'the dancer became a fitting emblem for the Symbolist ideal of seemingly effortless evocation' and that several of Symons's turns of phrase are clearly reminiscent of Mallarmé's, their perspectives on this interartistic analogy are rather different.[65] This divergence becomes evident when Mallarmé, after decrying contemporary choreographic practices for their excess of scenographic trappings and lack of coordination between the soloist and the corps, enounces what he refers to as a general truth about dance ('Le jugement, ou l'axiome'):

Arthur Symons: Origins of the Symbolist Movement', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 28.4 (1985), 346-353 and Dierkes-Thrun, pp. 29-39.

[64] Arthur Symons, 'Mallarmé's Divagations', *The Saturday Review*, 30 January 1897, pp. 109-110. See Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, ed. by Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2014), pp. 61-71.

[65] Dierkes-Thrun, p. 42.

> À savoir que la danseuse *n'est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle *n'est pas une femme*, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur, etc., et *qu'elle ne danse pas*, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élans, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction : poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe.[66]

Both Mallarmé and Symons investigated the art of ballet in a bid to find a hyper-evocative and synthetic uber-language. However, if the latter vindicated the pre-eminence of the body over words – or at least, as we shall point out below, sought to firmly anchor (literary) language to sensuality –, the former was adamant in his reduction of the dancing ballerina to a linguistic phenomenon. In Symons's view, the aesthetic power of dance originates from the exhibition of the female body, whereas Mallarmé's theory claims that ballet essentially negates the dancer's corporality. While Symons's essay extols dance for its independence from (useless) words, his French master saturates his explanation of the aesthetics of ballet with terms relating to writing, and thus somewhat dematerialises this art and subjugates it to poetic language. Far from being a sensual spectacle where 'there is no intrusion of words', dance is imagined as a special type of text which is indeed written by the body, but culminates in – or, rather, serves as the inspiration for ('suggérant') – an impersonal, self-creating and self-sufficient poem. That this 'writing' ('écriture') is 'bodily' ('corporelle') is almost inconsequential in that its physical origin is functional to a purely textual need: the conception of a language beyond ordinary prose.[67]

---

[66] Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres completes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), II, p. 171.
[67] See Herold, p. 151.

In this respect, Mallarmé and Symons's opposite uses of dance-related floral imagery are revealing. In the paragraph quoted above, Mallarmé postulates that the danseuse is 'an inhuman, desexed metaphor'[68] that encapsulates – and therefore targets – the 'elementary aspects' of human form, among which he also includes flowers. While Symons often draws on blossoms in order to symbolise the dancing body, here it is almost the reverse; the ballerina's body appears to exist merely as a metaphor for fundamental floral shapes. In this sense, Mallarmé's idea of flowers as essential forms that are involved in the genesis of poetry parallels and adds to the exclusively metaphorical status of the performer. Such connection of blossoms with dance and, in particular, with dance's imaginative contribution to poetic creation is fully evident in the conclusive paragraph of the essay, where Mallarmé theorises about the best way to experience a ballet show. The ideal spectator ('spectateur […] Ami') should contemplate the performance in a positive state of reverie, in which he should 'ignore everything but the sheer phenomenon of dance itself' and, most importantly, let the dancer channel his creative faculty.[69] Just as the ballerina throws into the air the rose-like pom-poms of her slippers ('les roses qu'enlève et jette en la visibilité de régions supérieures'), so she, acting as a medium, may elevate the poetic ability of the spectator, who is urged to 'lay submissively at her feet' – to yield to her – his poetic instinct, analogously metaphorised as a flower ('la Fleur d'abord de ton poétique instinct').[70] By mysteriously working on this creative impulse ('par un commerce dont paraît son sourire verser le secret'), the dancer, who is a sign, will 'write' the spectator's poetic vision as a sign ('écrira ta vision à la façon d'un Signe,

[68] Dierkes-Thrun, p. 41.

[69] Mallarmé, p. 174. Robert Greer Cohn, *Mallarmé's 'Divagations': A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 155.

[70] Mallarmé, p. 174

qu'elle est') – i.e. will form his vision, in her own image, as a linguistic object – and thus will allow him to accomplish his creation.[71] If Mallarmé's 'écriture corporelle' is superior to prose – even though one may go as far as to contend that this condition may not apply to highly lyric prose such as Mallarmé's own –, it is certainly not superior to poetry, as I have suggested above, but rather functions as a 'catalyst' for it.[72] As observed by Robert Greer Cohn in relation to Mallarmé's essay on Loïe Fuller, 'Mallarmé's idea is that poetry is a sort of pure ballet, which human dancers could represent theoretically (even if the leaps of poetry are vaster)': in the fertile intermedial exchange between ballet and verse, it is the latter which holds dominion.[73] Partly as a consequence of this aesthetic hierarchy, in 'Ballets' flowers do not symbolise dance and dancers, but rather poetry and its origination, something that constitutes a perfect example of the typical use of flower imagery in Mallarmé's oeuvre, where blossoms are often metaphors of poetic language and its special aesthetic status, from the juvenile 'Fleurs' to the otherworldly flora of 'Prose (pour des Esseintes)'; from the metapoetic rarefaction of the later sonnet 'Surgi de la croupe et du bond' to the epoch-making essay 'Le mystère dans les lettres', in which literature is defined as 'a labyrinthe illuminé par des fleurs'.[74]

In Symons's 'The World as Ballet', blossoms are definitely less conceptual. The essay notes how, during a ballet number, the dancers' 'young bodies […], full of the sense of joy in motion, or affecting that enjoyment' entice the eyes of the audience

---

[71] Mallarmé, p. 174.
[72] Dierkes-Thrun, p. 51.
[73] Cohn, p. 164.
[74] Mallarmé, p. 231. For Mallarmé's floral imagery see Philip Knight, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 204-225; Jean Starobinski, 'Sur quelques apparitions des fleurs', in *Mallarmé 1842– 1898: Un destin d'écriture*, ed. by Yves Peyré (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 20-35 and Suzanne Braswell, 'Mallarmé, Huysmans, and the Poetics of Hothouse Blooms', *French Forum*, 38.1-2 (2013), pp. 69-87.

'like a bouquet of flowers, a bouquet of living flowers, which have all the glitter of artificial ones'.[75] In this passage, which is echoed in Symons's later description of a painting by Constantin Guys,[76] the flowers are as alive ('living') as to appear artificially-enhanced – a Decadent oxymoron which alludes to the performers' makeup –, and thus perfectly symbolise the dancing bodies possessed by and transmitting the feeling of physical 'delight' sung in 'La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge' and 'Primrose Dance: Tivoli'. Once again, as I have pointed out above, Symons capitalises on floral imagery in order to encapsulate the eroticised physicality of dance.

Critics have convincingly shown that in Mallarmé's works the carnal dimension of ballet is repressed rather than properly rejected; in this sense, it will suffice here to note his attention to the dancer Cornalba's naked appearance in 'Ballets' ('qui danse comme dévêtue').[77] However, this sensuality is much more overt in Symons's poetry and prose, where – as noted by scholars such as Katharina Herold, Lene Østermark-Johansen, and Heather Marcovitch – the representation of the dancer is explicitly gendered and sexualised as an 'exposed object of desire'.[78] Moreover, just as Mallarmé's linguistic conception of ballet (and blossoms) retains a trace of sensuousness, so Symons's glorification of the flower-like dancing body as an alluring language of gesture should not be seen as completely opposed to poetry, but rather as seeking to blaze the trail for modern(ist) poetics. Indeed, precisely because ballet is a non-verbal form of expression, Symons may have valued it not only in itself, but also as 'a new model for poetic language', an interartistic ideal that, according to Linda Dowling's influential thesis, succeeded in exempting fin-de-siècle

[75] Symons, *Selected Writings*, p. 81.
[76] See Boyiopoulos, p. 26.
[77] Dierkes-Thrun, 51; Cohn, 145-146.
[78] See Herold, pp. 149-150; Østermark-Johansen, p. 25; Marcovitch, p. 466.

verse from the 'paralyzing choice' between an almost exotic, highly literate diction and an opposite tension towards a conversational (if not vernacular) poetic style (the latter being a process in which Symons's promotion and imitation of Verlaine played active part).[79] Dowling's idea that Symons's celebration and literary representation of ballet attest to an aesthetic shift 'from the intellectual *to* the sensuous' has been expanded by Marion Thain, who, in her discussion of the centrality of somatic experience in Symons's Symbolist-Impressionist oeuvre, brilliantly remarks how his 'dancer poems emphasise […] dance not, or not only, as a failed Romantic symbol of spiritual transcendence, but as an emblem of a lyric aspiration to represent something that is extra-linguistic not because it exceeds language, but because it precedes it'.[80] It is the sensual pre-linguistic fundament of literature, its physical origin, that Symons sought to access via the model of dance, whether by carefully analysing this artistic form in his critical writings, by thematising it in his verse, or, more subtly, by emulating its sensuousness through poetic language. It is therefore no wonder that floral images supplied him with a fundamental tool to envisage his theoretical and textual engagement with the dancing body; in this respect, like the feminised violet of his poem 'Proem', these images may be truly regarded as (art)ificial flowers of his aesthetic ideal.

[79] Dowling, p. 238.
[80] Dowling, p. 239. Thain, p. 141.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[Anon.], 'Literary Gossip', *The Athenæum*, 24 April 1880, p. 538

[Anon.], review of Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Songs of the Springtides* (1880), *The Athenæum*, 22 May 1880, p. 656

Abrams, M. H., *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953)

Abrams, M. H., *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Evolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971)

Alfano, Veronica, *The Lyric in Victorian Memory: Poetic Remembering and Forgetting from Tennyson to Housman* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017)

Alighieri, Dante, *Dante's Divine Comedy*, trans. by C. B. Cayley (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1854)

Alighieri, Dante, *Divina Commedia: Paradiso*, ed. by Umberto Bosco, Giovanni Reggio, Michela Volante (Milano: Le Monnier Scuola, 2011)

Ansted, David Thomas and Robert Gordon Latham, *Channel Islands* (London: Allen and Co, 1862)

Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Armstrong, Isobel, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Bachelard, Gaston, *La flamme d'une chandelle* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1961)

Bate, Jonathan, *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1991)

Baudelaire, Charles, *Correspondance I*, ed. by Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, 1973)

Baudelaire, Charles, *Œuvres complètes I*, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975)

Bauer, Laurie, *Compounds and Compounding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Beckson, Karl (ed.), *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1982)

Beckson, Karl, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987)

The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

The Bichard's Guide to the Islands of Guernsey, Alderney, Sark & Herm (Guernsey: T. M. Bichard, 1863)

Bini, Benedetta, 'Alle origini del ritratto: 'An English Poet' di Walter Pater', in *Percorsi. Studi in onore di Angela Giannitrapani*, ed. by Mirella Bini and Massimo Ferrari Zumbini (Viterbo: Betagamma, 1993), pp. 47-64

Bini, Benedetta, 'Genius loci: il pellegrinaggio di Emerald Uthwart', in *Walter Pater (1839-1894): Le forme della modernità. The Forms of Modernity*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Franco Marucci (Milano: Cisalpino, 1996), pp. 187-202

Bizzotto, Elisa, *La mano e l'anima* (Milano: Cisalpino, 2001)

The Botanical Register, ed. by Sydenham Edwards (London: James Ridgway, 1817)

Boyiopoulos, Kostas, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015)

Brake, Laurel, 'Degrees of Darkness: Ruskin, Pater and Modernism', in *Ruskin and Modernism*, ed. by Giovanni Cianci and Peter Nicholls (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 48-66

Braswell, Suzanne, 'Mallarmé, Huysmans, and the Poetics of Hothouse Blooms', *French Forum*, 38.1-2 (2013), 69-87

The British Florist: Or, Lady's Journal of Horticulture (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846)

Brooks-Davies, Douglas, 'mysteries', in *The Spenser Encyclopedia* , ed. by A. C. Hamilton (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 486

Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Campbell, Jan, *Freudian Passions: Psychoanalysis, Form and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2013)

Carter, Alexandra, *Dance and Dancers in the Victorian and Edwardian Music Hall Ballet* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)

Christ, Carol T., *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975)

Civitarese, Giuseppe, *Il sogno necessario. Nuove teorie e tecniche dell'interpretazione* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2013)

Clements, Patricia, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985)

Cohn, Robert Greer, *Mallarmé's 'Divagations': A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990)

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004)

Conlon, John, *Walter Pater and the French Tradition* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1982)

Connor, Steve, 'Intersensoriality', paper presented at the Conference of the Senses, Thames Valley University, 6 February 2004, <http://stevenconnor.com/intersensoriality.html>

Cronin, Richard, '*The Sensitive Plant* and the Poetry of Irresponsibility', in *The Neglected Shelley*, ed. by Alan M. Weinberg and Tymothy Webb (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 199-214

Curtis's Botanical Magazine; or Flower-Garden Displayed, 31 (1810)

Dale, Peter and Brandon C. Yen, *Wordsworth's Gardens and Flowers: The Spirit of Paradise* (Woodbridge: ACC Art Books, 2018)

Daley, Kenneth, *The Rescue of Romanticism: Walter Pater and John Ruskin* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2001)

Day, Sean, 'Synaesthesia and Synaesthetic Metaphors', *Psyche*, 2.32 (1996), <http://psyche.cs.monash.edu.au/v2/psyche-2-32-day.html>

Darwin, Erasmus, *The Botanic Garden. A Poem, in Two Parts* (New York: T. and J. Swords, 1798)

De Gubernatis, Angelo, *La mythologie des plantes ou Les légendes du règne végétal* (Paris: Reinwald, 1882)

de Man, Paul, 'Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image', in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 66-77

Desmarais, Jane, *Monsters under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers from 1850 to the Present* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018)

Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology, ed. by William Smith (London: John Murray, 1850), I

Dierkes-Truhn, Petra, 'Arthur Symons' Decadent Aesthetics: Stéphane Mallarmé and the Dancer Revisited', in *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. by Paul Fox (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2014), pp. 29-58

Dobell, Sidney, *The poems of Sydney Dobell* (London: Walter Scott, 1887)

Dowling, Linda, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian 'Fin de Siècle'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986)

Evangelista, Stefano, '"Outward Nature and the Moods of Men": Romantic Mythology in Pater's Essays on Dionysus and Demeter', in *Walter Pater: Transparencies of Desire*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Lesley Higgins and Carolyn Williams (Greensboro: ELT Press, 2002), pp. 107-118

Fabbri, Lorenzo, 'Il papavero da oppio nella cultura e nella religione romana: aspetti simbolici e artistici' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università di Milano, 2014-2015)

Fletcher, Ian, 'Symons, Yeats, and the Demonic Dance', *The London Magazine*, 7.6 (1960), 46-60

Fletcher, Pauline, *Gardens and Grim Ravines: The Language of Landscape in Victorian Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983)

Freeman, Nicholas, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Freeman, Nicholas, 'Symons and Whistler: The Art of Seeing', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais, J. and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 15-31

Freud, Sigmund, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1981; revised edn), V

Frohock, W. M., 'Rimbaud Amid Flowers', *Modern Language Notes*, 76.2 (1961), 140-143

Gautier, Théophile, *La comédie de la mort* (Paris: Desessart, 1838)

Ghosh, Ranjan, *Transcultural Poetics and the Concept of the Poet: From Philip Sidney to T. S. Eliot* (New York: Routledge, 2017)

Gnappi, Carla Maria, 'Beauteous sprays and drooping corollas. Floral imagery in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*', *RSV Rivista di Studi Vittoriani*, 12-13.24-25 (2007-2008), 71-87

Gordon, Jan B., 'The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons' London Nights', *Victorian Poetry*, 9.4 (1971), 429-443

Hawthorne, W. D., 'Six new *Pavetta* (Rubiaceae), including three 'litter-bin' species from the evergreen forests of Western Africa', *Kew Bulletin*, 68.4 (2013), 559-577

Herold, Katharina, 'Dancing the Image: Sensoriality and Kinesthetics in the Poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Symons', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais, J. and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 141-161

Herrick, Robert, *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, ed. by Tom Cain and Ruth Connoly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), II

Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, ed. by M. L. West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

Hogle, Jerrold E., 'Visionary Rhyme: The Sensitive-Plant *and* The Witch of Atlas', in *The Oxford Handbook of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Michael O'Neill, Anthony Howe, and Madeleine Callaghan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 360-374

Hönnighausen, Gisela, 'Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry*, 10.1 (1972), 1-15

Hönnighausen, Lothar, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and 'Fin de Siècle'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Hortus Kewensis (London: Longman, 1811), II

Hugo, Victor, *Les travailleurs de la mer* (Paris: Librairie illustrée, 1877)

Hugo, Victor, *L'Archipel de la Manche* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883)

Hugo, Victor, *Oeuvres poétiques*, ed. by Gaëtan Picon and Pierre Albouy (Paris: Gallimard, 1964-1974), I (1964)

Hutchison, J., 'Mr Tennyson as a Botanist', *The Saint Pauls Magazine*, 13 October 1873, pp. 443-452

Ingram, John Henry, *Flora Symbolica, or The Language of Sentiments of Flowers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1869)

James, G. W., *The Sark Guide* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1845)

Jameson, Fredric, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981)

Johnson, Samuel, *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia*, ed. by Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by James Creed Meredith, ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Keefe, Robert, '"Apollo in Picardy": Pater's Monk and Ruskin's Madness', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 29 (1986), 361-370

Kelley, Theresa, *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

Kelley, Theresa M., *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012)

Kent, Elizabeth, *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower Garden* (London: Taylor and Hessey, 1823)

Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image, with a new epilogue by the author* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1st edn. 1957])

Kilbride, Laura McCormick, *Swinburne's Style: An Experiment in Verse History* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018)

King, Amy M., *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

Knight, Philip, *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth-century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)

Kristeva, Julia, *La Révolution du langage poétique. L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974)

Kuduk Weiner, Stephanie, 'Knowledge and Sense Experience in Swinburne's Late Poetry', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspective on the Mature Work*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 11-27

Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Langbaum, Robert, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1957)

Larson, Jennifer, *Greek Nymphs: Myth, Cult, Lore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Levin, Yisrael 'Solar Erotica: Swinburne's Myth of Creation', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspective on the Mature Work*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 55-72

Levin, Yisrael, *Swinburne's Apollo: Myth, Faith and Victorian Spirituality* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013)

Lindley, John and Joseph Paxton, *Paxton's Flower Garden* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1850-51)

Loiseleur-Deslongchamps, Jean and Mordant de Launat, *Herbier général de l'amateur* (Paris: Audot, 1821)

Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants, ed. by Jane Loudon and others (London: Longmans, Green and co., 1880)

Loudon, Jane, *Ladies' Flower Garden, or Ornamental Annuals* (London: William Smith, 1840)

Louis, Margot K., *Swinburne and His Gods: The Roots and Growth of an Agnostic Poetry* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990)

Louis, Margot K., 'Erotic Figuration in Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse,* Canto 2: The Vanishing Knight and the Drift of Butterflies', *Victorian Poetry,* 47.4 (2009), 647-59

Louis, Margot K., *Persephone Rises, 1860-1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009)

Madden, Ed, 'Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich', *College Literature*, 24.1 (1997), 11-27

Mahdi, Waruno, *Malay Words and Malay Things: Lexical Souvenirs from an Exotic Archipelago in German Publications before 1700* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007)

Mahood, M. M., *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Mallett, Philip, 'The City and the Self', in *Ruskin and Environment: The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Michael Wheeler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 38-57

Mallarmé, Stéphane, *Œuvres completes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), II

Mancoff, Debra N., *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Munich: Prestel, 2003)

Maniquis, Robert M., 'The Puzzling "Mimosa": Sensitivity and Plant Symbols in Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 8.3 (1969), 129-155

Marcovitch, Heather, 'Dance, Ritual, and Arthur Symons's *London Nights*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56.4 (2013), 462-482

Marotta, Giovanna, 'Tra linguistica e letteratura: paradigmi e note sinestetiche', in *Modelli linguistici e metodi dell'interpretazione letteraria*, ed. by Gianni Iotti and Giovanna Marotta (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2018), pp. 187-206

Marsden, William, *The History of Sumatra* (London: J. McCreery, 1811)

Marshall, Donald G., 'Kant and English Nature Poetry', *The Iowa Review*, 21.2 (1991), 78-83

Marucci, Franco, 'Ruskin, Pater e il Rinascimento sfaccettato', in *The Dominion of Daedalus*, ed. by. Jeanne Clegg and Paul Tucker (Hertfordshire: Brentham Press, 1994), pp. 130-142

Massumi, Brian, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002)

Matz, Jesse, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics* (Cambirdge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Maxwell, Catherine, 'Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Swinburne's "A Rosary"', *The Explicator*, 52.2 (1994), 101-104

Maxwell, Catherine, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)

Maxwell, Catherine, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009)

Maxwell, Catherine, 'In the Artist's Studio', in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 726-744

Maxwell, Catherine, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

Mazzeno, Laurence W. and Ronald D. Morrison, 'Introduction: Practical Ecocriticism and the Victorian Text', in *Victorian Writers and the Environment: Ecocritical*

Perspectives, ed. by Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-12

McNeillie, Andrew, 'Bloomsbury', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-28

Meyers, Terry L., 'Shelley's Influence on *Atalanta in Calydon*', *Victorian Poetry*, 14.2 (1976), 150-154

Meyers, Terry L., 'Swinburne, Shelley, and *Songs Before Sunrise*', in *The Whole Music of Passion*, ed. by Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 40-51

Miles, Josephine, *The Pathetic Fallacy in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Octagon, 1965)

Modiano, Raimonda, *Coleridge and the Concept of Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1985)

Moine, Fabienne, *Women Poets in the Victorian Era: Cultural Practices and Nature Poetry* (Farnahm and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015)

Morris, Bruce, 'Mallarmé's Letters to Arthur Symons: Origins of the Symbolist Movement', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 28.4 (1985), 346-353

Morris, Bruce, 'Introduction', in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies Translated by Arthur Symons*, ed. by Bruce Morris (Edinburgh: The Tragara Press, 1986), pp. 3-6

Mouly, Arnaud and others, 'Phylogeny and classification of the species-rich pantropical showy genus *Ixora* (Rubiaceae-Ixoreae) with indications of geographical monophyletic units and hybrids', *American Journal of Botany*, 96.3 (2009), 686-706

Murphy, Patricia, *Reconceiving Nature: Ecofeminism in Late Victorian Women's Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019)

Nichols, Ashton, *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

O'Gorman, Francis, 'What is Haunting Tennyson's "Maud" (1855)?', *Victorian Poetry*, 48.3 (2010), 293-312

O'Neill, Michael, ''Stars Caught in my Branches': Swinburne and Shelley', in *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 103-118

Ormond, Leonée, *Alfred Tennyson. A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993)

Østermark-Johansen, Lene, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011)

Østermark-Johansen, Lene, 'The Rhythm of Life and Art: Symons and the Interrelationship between Rodin's Sculpture and Modern Dance at the 'Fin de Siècle'', in *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic, Vagabond*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista (Cambridge: Legenda, 2018), pp. 12-29

Parham, John (ed.), *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2002)

Parham, John, 'Editorial', *Green Letters*, 14 (2011), 5-9

Parkes, Adam, *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Pater, Walter, 'On Wordsworth', *The Fortnightly Review*, 21 (1874), 455-465

Pater, Walter, *Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974)

Pater, Walter, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by Michael Levey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985)

Pater, Walter, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Pater, William, *Imaginary Portraits*, ed. by Lene Østermark-Johansen (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014)

Payne, WM. E., *Monograph on Lilium Tigrinum* (Detroit, 1870)

Phillips, Henry, *Floral Emblems* (London: Saunders and Otley, 1825)

Pichois, Claude and Jean-Paul Avice, *Dictionnaire Baudelaire* (Tusson: Du Lérot, 2002)

Polonsky, Rachel, 'Poe's Aesthetic Theory', in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Kevin J. Hayes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 35-49

Powell, Rosalind, 'Poetry, Linnaeus, Analogy, and Taxonomy: Botanical Naming and Categorization in Erasmus Darwin and Charlotte Smith', *Philological Quarterly*, 95.1 (2016), 101-24

Pritchard, Jane, ''More Natural than Nature, More Artificial than Art': The Dance Criticism of Arthur Symons', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 21.2 (2003), 36-89

Raffalovich, Mark André, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* (London: David Bogue, 1885)

Raymond, Meredith B., '"The Lake of Gaube": Swinburne's Dive in the Dark and the "Indeterminate Moment"', *Victorian Poetry*, 9.1/2 (1971), 185-199

Reed, John R., 'Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*: The Poet-Lover's Song of Love', *Victorian Poetry* 4.2 (1966), 99-120

Richard, Robert J., *The Romantic Conception of Life : Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

Richer, Jean, *Études et recherches sur Théophile Gautier prosateur*, (Paris: Nizet, 1981)

Rimbaud, Arthur, *Opere*, ed. by Diana Grange Fiori (Milano: Mondadori, 1975)

Riquelme, John Paul, 'Between two worlds and beyond them: John Ruskin and Walter Pater', in *Oscar Wilde in Context*, ed. by Kerry Powell and Peter Raby (Camrbidge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 125-136

Rooksby, Rikky, 'The Algernonicon, or Thirteen Ways of Looking at *Tristram of Lyonesse*', in *The Whole Music of Passion*, ed. by Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 73-91.

Rossetti, Christina, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by Simon Humphries (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)

Roxburgh, William, *Flora Indica; or Descriptions of Indian Plants* (Calcutta: Thacker, 1832; repr. 1874), III

Ruskin, John, *Modern Painters IV*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904)

Ruskin, John, *The Cestus of Aglaia and The Queen of the Air*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1905)

Ruskin, John, *Love's Meinie and Proserpina*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1906)

Ruskin, John, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Sammells, Neil, 'Wilde Nature', in *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, ed. by Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Publications, 1998), pp. 124-133

Saville, Julia, *Victorian Soul-Talk: Poetry, Democracy, and the Body Politic* (Cham: Palgrave, 2017)

Scarry, Elaine, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

Scarry, Elaine, 'Imagining Flowers: *Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)*', in *Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by John B. Bender and Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 95-117

Scrambles in Serk: Scenery, History, Laws of One of the Channel Islands (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1861)

Sdegno, Emma, 'The Alps', in *The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 32-48

Seaton, Beverly, 'Considering the Lilies: Ruskin's "Proserpina" and Other Victorian Flower Books', *Victorian Studies*, 28.2 (1985), 255-282

Seaton, Beverly, 'Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), 679-701

Seaton, Beverly, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995)

Shakespeare, William, *The Complete Sonnets and Poems*, ed. by Colin Burrow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, ed. by Kelvin Everest and others (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000)

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002)

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *The Poems of Shelley 1819-1820*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011)

Shuter, William, 'History as Palingenesis in Pater and Hegel', *PMLA*, 86 (1971), 411-421

Shuter, William, 'The Arrested Narrative of "Emerald Uthwart"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 45 (1990), 1-25

Slinn, E. Warwick, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991)

Slinn, E. Warwick, 'Experimental Form in Victorian Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 46-66

Smith, Charlotte, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

Smith, Jonathan, 'Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne's "The Sundew" and Darwin's *Insectivorous Plants*', *Victorian Poetry* 41. 1 (2003), 131-50

Some Imagist Poets, 1917, ed. by Amy Lowell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917)

Spenser, Edmund, *The Fairie Queene*, ed. by A. C. Hamilton and others (London: Routledge, 2013)

Starobinski, Jean, 'Sur quelques apparitions des fleurs', in *Mallarmé 1842– 1898: Un destin d'écriture*, ed. by Yves Peyré (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 20-35

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1904)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *Lesbia Brandon by Algernon Charles Swinburne*, ed. by Randolph Hughes (London: The Falcon Press, 1952)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. by Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-62)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, ed. by Kenneth Haynes (London: Penguin Books, 2000)

Swinburne, Algernon Charles, *Major Poems and Collected Prose*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004)

Swinburne: The Critical Heritage, ed. by C. K. Hyder (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970)

Syme, Alison, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-siècle Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010)

Symons, Arthur, 'Mallarmé's Divagations', *The Saturday Review*, 30 January 1897, pp. 109-110

Symons, Arthur, *Images of Good and Evil* (London: Heinemann, 1899 [1900])

Symons, Arthur, *Cities* (London: J. M. Dent, 1903)

Symons, *A Fool of the World and Other Poems* (London: William Heinemann, 1906)

Symons, Arthur, *Knave of Hearts, 1894-1908* (London: William Heinemann, 1913)

Symons, Arthur, *Colour Studies in Paris* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1918)

Symons, Arthur, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Roger Holdsworth (New York: Routledge, 2003)

Symons, Arthur, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, ed. by Matthew Creasy (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2014)

Symons, Arthur, *Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: MHRA, 2017)

Symons, Arthur, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (London: MHRA, 2017)

Sypher, Francis Jacques, 'Swinburne and Wagner', *Victorian Poetry*, 9.1/2 (1971), 165-183

Tasso, Torquato, *Gerusalemme liberata*, ed. by Lanfranco Caretti (Torino: Einaudi, 1971)

Taylor, Jesse Oak, 'Where is Victorian Ecocriticism?', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 43 (2015), 877-894

Tennyson, Alfred, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007)

Teukolsky, Rachel, 'Modernist Ruskin, Victorian Baudelaire: Revisioning Nineteenth-Century Aesthetics', *PMLA*, 122.3 (2007), 711-727

Thain, Marion, 'Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 223-240

Thain, Marion, *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism: Forms of Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016)

Tucker, Paul, ''A Whole World of Transformation': Landscape and Myth in Walter Pater's MS Fragment on Corot', in *Walter Pater (1839-1894): Le forme della modernità. The Forms of Modernity*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Franco Marucci (Milano: Cisalpino, 1996), pp. 45-80

Tucker, Herbert F., 'What Goes Around: Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels*', in *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* , ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 125-137

Tyas, Robert, *The Sentiment of Flowers, or Language of Flora* (London: Tilt, 1836)

Vigus, James, 'Continental Romanticism in Britain', in *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism*, ed. by David Duff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 691-706

Virgil, *Virgil's Aeneid*, trans. by John Dryden (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1909)

Voskuil, Lynn, 'The Victorian Novel and Horticulture', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 549-568

Walsh, John A., '"Quivering Web of Living Thought": Conceptual Networks in Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*', in *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspective on the Mature Work*, ed. by Yisrael Levin (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 29-53

Ward, J. P., 'An Anxiety of No Influence: Walter Pater on William Wordsworth', in *Pater in the 1990s*, ed. by Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1991), pp. 63-75

Wellek, René, *Immanuel Kant in England 1793-1838* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931)

Whistler, James McNeill, *Whistler on Art: Selected Letters and Writings of James McNeill Whistler*, ed. by Nigel Thorp (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 2004)

Whiteley, Giles, *Aestheticism and the Philosophy of Death: Walter Pater and Post-Hegelianism* (London: Legenda, 2010)

Whiteley, Giles, *Schelling's Reception in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018)

Wilde, Oscar, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Williams, Carolyn, *Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1989)

Wilmer, Clive, ''No such thing as a flower […] no such thing as a man': John Ruskin's response to Darwin', in *Darwin, Tennyson and Their Readers: Explorations in Victorian Literature and Science*, ed. by Valerie Purton (New York: Anthem Press, 2013), pp. 97-108

Wimsatt, William K., 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery', in *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Norton, 1970), pp. 77-87

Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1992)

Woolf, Virginia, *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Wordsworth, William *Peter Bell, A Tale in Verse* (London: Longman, 1819)

Wordworth, William, *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Nicholas Halmi (New York: Norton, 2014)