

# Gabriela Dragnea Horvath

## Ecology and Thought: the case of Flowers<sup>1</sup>

From a biological viewpoint flowers are the reproduction organs of plants and were attested as such in empirical science since the first botanical taxonomies of antiquity, but the human agents have domesticated many of the wild flowers and have used both the wild and the cultivated for a variety of purposes that divert flowers from accomplishing their biological role. Thus they can serve as nourishment, healing remedies, poisons, drugs, sources of color and perfume, objects of decoration, of worship, totems, and carriers of messages to other humans and to the divine. In addition to the immediate experience with flowers, humans have integrated their names or images in meaning constructs, making them participants in art objects, poetic discourses, religious narratives, ethics, language expressions. A noteworthy function of flowers is replacing language in communication, either by their simple evocative presence, or in artificial idioms based on conveying a specific meaning to each type of flower. All these uses of flowers plead for their relevance in human culture, as J. Goody's magisterial work on the subject proves:<sup>2</sup> they illustrate the wide range of capacities humans attribute to them from fertility, nutritional, charming or destructive power, to beauty, and symbolic expression.

Are these approaches to flowers a universal feature? In today's ongoing process of globalization, when images, patterns of thought and flowers themselves circulate at great speed, they appear to be integral to every culture, but in a historical perspective, there were areas in the world where flowers were silent. Goody's extensive research informs, for example, that in large parts of traditional Black Africa flowers were not sacrificed for aesthetic or religious purposes, consequently there was no flower culture and flower symbolism and "it was animals and men that carried semantic meaning" (Goody, 416). The introduction of flowers as objects of culture to Africa is due to Christianity and Islam in tight connection with their values. The rules for becoming a good Gbebo Christian in Liberia are significant in this respect, for he "observed Sunday, pulled down greegrees

---

<sup>1</sup> A preliminary version of this essay appeared in the online publication *Voyages- Journal of Contemporary Humanism* under the title *Thinking with Flowers*, No.1, Spring 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Goody, Jack, *The Culture of Flowers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

(charms of 'fetiches'), and refused to participate in traditional sacrifices, but ... also wore western clothes, built a western house, married only one wife, and cultivated a garden of flowers” (Goody, 415). This reveals how transforming the environment was meant to run parallel to the assimilation of the entire metaphorical construction of Christian mythology from the terrestrial paradise to the promise of human flourish in the theology of salvation. The garden of flowers was a support for the new faith and the expansion of imagination that came with it, and it shows how human subjects project their meanings and intentions on natural objects like flowers. Yet this leads to a question: are flowers instrumental to cognition only as means of signifying concepts, the way they convey emotions and religious attitudes in ceremonies and rituals, or have they actually contributed to expand or refine human knowledge? Do they have an epistemic value, or putting it in Wordsworth’s terms can we ‘gather wisdom from a flower?’

A question like this could not have been raised today without the challenge ecology poses to philosophy. In its attempt to *put brain, body and world together again*,<sup>3</sup> ecological thinking, amenable to Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (1972) conceives culture and nature as parts of one dynamic holistic system, in which human and non-human persons exchange information and energy. The epistemological consequence of this approach is that “mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system and not reducible to the workings of the human brain; cognitive processes are external to human brains as much as they are internal ...” according to the Finnish archeologist Vesa-Pekka Herva who applies the lesson of ecology in an essay entitled: *Flower-lovers, after all? Rethinking Religion and Human-Environment Relations in Minoan Crete* (589). The author reinterprets the flower symbolism in Minoan Crete as an example of ecological thinking without recurring to traditional notions like myth or animism. This approach is on one side an extension of the concept of thought and on the other, a reduction. As an extension it grants every living being a status of dignity, by assuming its participation in self-awareness and world-awareness, conceived as a scale starting from the elementary level of simple organisms and reaching its epitome in the human being. As consciousness is embodied and intrinsic in life forms, human consciousness is no longer co-natural with a source of rationality and self-awareness beyond and above itself but shares the biological foundation of the simplest organisms. Rather than anthropocentric, the world turns bio-centric, celebrating life in all its forms. The paradoxical aspect of this way of rethinking human nature and the nature of consciousness is that it stems from the scientific results of the most technological civilization that has ever existed on earth and which has developed precisely because it wanted to supersede man’s natural limitations. So, in an ecological perspective, humans are close to the non-

---

<sup>3</sup> Clark Andy, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again*, 1998; *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, 2011; Gibson James J., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, 2014; Ingold Tim, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood*, 2000.

human persons endowed with self-and world awareness because of their biological status but defining thought as processing information and responding to it reduces the phenomenology of human cognition to a schematic stimulus-reaction line, which undermines the hierarchy of intelligence that biology itself defends. The ultimate scientific explanation of consciousness, understood as self-awareness and awareness of the environment is a series of physico-chemical processes. As final account of *calculative thinking*, to use Heidegger's meaning of the concept in *Gelassenheit (Discourse on Thought)* it is problematic: conceiving the reality of thought in physico-chemical data presents itself as an objective answer to the question of truth, while it is an expression of the present-day structure of human knowledge reached through scientific instruments. As a satisfactory answer about the foundation of thought it invites to thoughtlessness, as Heidegger warned in the above-mentioned text, turning futile the *meditative thinking, das besinnliche Denken*, that "contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is" (45-6). Moving away from the horizon of mystery, calculative thinking dissolves the sense of wonder, *das Erstaunen* Heidegger speaks about in *What Is Philosophy?*, which is not only the principle of philosophy itself (80-85), but also the ferment of human creativity. Using flowers as an example, it is precisely the sense of wonder in front of their qualities that has stimulated knowledge.

In addition, assuming that 'mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system' implies that thought is no longer necessarily co-natural with language. For the human subject this is a gain and a loss. It is a gain as it allows us to claim that we think the world in as many ways as we experience it, which means that every perception, intuition, sensation, emotion, movement, gesture that is present to consciousness contributes to extend thinking beyond the left brain hemisphere, and this is a restoration of human integrity. On the other hand it is a loss, as it tends to call language any code or modality of signaling specific to the environment system, which by implication deprives language of its creative power and its historical dimension. Bringing nature and culture on the same level tends to diminish the human agent's rootedness in cultural history by exalting the defining properties of genetic memory, which conversely threatens the understanding of human integrity and does not correspond to reality. In reference to flowers, they are experienced in the historical-vacuum of a laboratory only by scientists, but every other human category lives them in a social context that involves the intermediation of a cultural tradition transmitted through language. Words convey to the individual the historically accumulated knowledge about flowers, warning for instance against the toxic properties of some, and informing about their uses and meanings in the social and religious rituals of the respective community.

Interestingly enough, the claim that cognitive processes are external to the human brain as much as they are internal suits the literal extension of human thought in technology and places nature

and technology on analogous positions, even if technology is the product of human brain, while nature is not, rather the human brain is the outcome of a natural evolutionary process. Further, how far can we de-centralize our human-grounded world picture by accepting that mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system? The deepened awareness of belonging to a natural order and sharing its processuality with the simplest manifestations of life does not annul the human person's realization of his or her difference, capacity to create culture, use language and dominate to a certain extent nature itself. Treating the entities of the environment as non-human persons means changing their status from objects into interlocutors of the human subjects, which is actually the core of archaic animism, and of personification as literary procedure. To the reader of English literature this may evoke Tennyson's poetic conversation with flowers in *Maud* (Part I, XXII, 1855) or *The Garden of Live Flowers* in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), where Alice finds out from the Tiger-lily that flowers "can talk...when there's anybody worth talking to". She also becomes aware that they emit critical judgments on each other and on an occasional visitor like herself: the Rose thinks Alice's face "has got some sense in it, though it's not a clever one!" but admits her being 'the right color', while the Tiger-lily is more tempted to accept her, for "if only her petals curled up a little more, she'd be all right"(201-2). In a traditional interpretation the Rose and the Violet could be Alice Liddell's sisters, Rhoda and Violet, disguised as flowers (note 2, 203), and the Tiger-lily a camouflaged Victorian lady expressing her opinions on a stranger, in an ironical reconstruction of the mental tics of the time. Yet, looked upon from an ecological perspective, the personification of flowers in literature may appear as an anticipation of the scientific claim that every organism, even the simplest one, weighs critically the stimuli and the possibilities of response, in other words, that each form of life manifests a *sui generis* type of categorization dictated by survival necessities and explicit in its reactions. In an ecological frame of reference flowers 'think'. Indeed, botanical and genetic studies have published evidence that plants have forms of memory and intelligence that make them knowledgeable participants in their immediate environment and in cosmic cycles. Far from reacting in a linear way to stimuli, plants enact a sophisticated system of perceiving the world and adapting to it: they have an internal clock, are aware of and respond to moon phases<sup>4</sup>, have developed visual, thermic or olfactive 'tricks' to attract pollinators.<sup>5</sup> They seem to 'guess' the intention of an animal or a human approaching them and warn each other against danger. One can thus deduce that flowers not only elaborate signals from the environment in a way that could be considered their specific type of thinking, but they also communicate, sending messages to acknowledged or possible

---

<sup>4</sup> Seymour Simon, *The secret clocks: time senses of living things*, 1979; Alvin Silverstein, Virginia B. Silverstein, Laura Silverstein Nunn, *Clocks and Rhythms*, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Drori, Jonathan, *The beautiful Tricks of Flowers*, URL: TED Talks, 2011.

receivers with a precise intentionality. Aristotle's scale of being which placed plants on the lowest level and ascribed them an irrational soul manifesting itself through nutrition and growth does not hold in today's scientific terms, and it is fascinating to see how a science based definition of thought contests philosophical tenets on one hand and confirms poetic intuitions on the other.

Can an inquiry into the contribution of flowers to mankind's self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, reconcile the tenets of ecological thinking with cultural history and philosophy? Cultural ecology and ecological anthropology have offered partial answers to this question, focused mostly on the sociological or anthropological aspects. An attempt to consider humans both as contemplative beings and culture producers in connection with their environment could start from considering ecological thinking in a wide cultural historical perspective. According to Goody's research, Eurasia is the main area where flowers have had semantic value since ancient times, yet West and East have diverging attitudes towards nature. Ecology is the first Western trend of thought that humbles humanity on a scientific basis, after a millennia-long culture of nature domination that featured in Greek and Roman antiquity and found its confirmation in the Bible, where the first man, created in the image of God and placed in the Garden of Eden as its guardian and keeper, was given the rule over the fish, the birds, the livestock and the wild animals (*Gen 1:26*). Conversely, Buddhism conceives humans as belonging to the vast category of sentient beings that need to be equally respected, while Daoism establishes that governing one's life is subordinated to serving nature, and humans, like any part of existence, are manifestations of the Great Tao which "gives birth to all beings", nourishes and maintains them, "creating without possessing/ acting without expecting/ guiding without interfering" (Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, Ch.51). And yet, in spite of this essential difference, an inquiry into the wisdom gathered in the East and West from flowers provides a wide area of corresponding meanings and cultural connotations.

A valid suggestion comes from a theory based on articulating ecology to cognitive science and linguistics in a phenomenological perspective, proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson for some decades now. Mainly exposed in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) and *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), their theory acknowledges Merleau-Ponty as a precursor and is human-centered and language-aware. Setting out from the ecological premise that reason "is not an essence that separates us from other animals; rather it places us on a continuum with them" (*Philosophy in the Flesh*, 4), Lakoff and Johnson explore the modalities of cognition offered by metaphors and their prevalence in our interaction with the environment. According to them "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of things in terms of another" (*Metaphors We Live By*, 5). Metaphors are "conceptual in nature" and "are among our principal vehicles for understanding" (*Metaphors We Live By*, 159). In *Philosophy in the Flesh* they bring evidence that the rise of metaphors corresponds to the

formation of neural structures by conflation of brain areas. The cognitive scale starts with the sensorimotor inference, which offers the basis for conceptual inference. Since many of the subjective experiences are conceptualized as metaphors, one can distinguish between: primary metaphors that have a minimal 'atomic' structure and arise “naturally, automatically, and unconsciously through everyday experience by means of conflation, during which cross-domain associations are formed” (46), and complex metaphors that are 'molecular' and result from conceptual blending, co-activating primary metaphors domains. A large part of these metaphors are conventional, shared and fixed in language patterns. They are “used to reason with”, while concepts are structured by multiple metaphors (65; 70-1). A powerful statement is that we ignore great part of our neural activity, recognized now as the *cognitive unconscious*. In line with cognitive science discoveries, the authors claim that reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged and that spiritual experiences, embodied as any other mental state, are the outcome of the imaginative empathic projection, which is a form of “transcendence” and represents “a vital cognitive faculty” (565).

By turning the metaphor into the ground of meaning constitution in common understanding and communication, poetry, rhetoric, science and philosophy, Lakoff and Johnson offer a basis to bring together sciences and humanities and simultaneously take a step towards the de-Hellenization of Western culture, understood as a departure from its traditional categories established by classical thought. They openly challenge the philosophical tradition of the West, its Greek roots included, classifying transcendental reason, the dichotomy of body and soul, the doctrine of forms, the classical correspondence theory of truth and God as metaphors. The old query of whether human knowledge is shaped to reality or whether judgment conditions its understanding evaporates once one postulates the biological and contextual factors as determining the way we think: the two processes are no longer mutually exclusive, but complementary and concatenated.

The issue is obviously the hierarchy of knowledge, which Lakoff and Johnson redefine by asserting the scientifically proven embodiedness of knowledge as truth and reformulating the goals of philosophy in a way that is surprisingly congenial to Nietzsche (who is not a reference in *Philosophy in the Flesh*): “Philosophers are not simply logic-choppers who fine-tune what their culture already knows in its bones. Instead, they are the poets of systematic thought. Philosophy at its best is creative and synthetic. It helps us put our world together in a way that makes sense to us and that helps us deal with the problems that confront us in our lives. When philosophers do this well they are using our ordinary conceptual resources in very extraordinary ways” (542). The consequence of this view of philosophy is an anthropology that defines humans as philosophical animals (551) since “much of everyday metaphysics arises from metaphor” (128) and metaphors are seminal in our life choices and in our categorization of truth (Ch. 24, 159-184). Assimilating metaphor to

epistemology comes close to Heidegger's interpretation of man as a *meditative being* (*Gelassenheit*, 47), and saves the creative dimension of the human agent and his participation in wonder.

Lakoff and Jonson's democratic conception of philosophy and philosophizing entitles flowers to become a philosophical issue, as they have contributed to enrich human experience and thought and have stimulated metaphors that encompass essential questions concerning the sense of life. Flowers are present at all levels of thought as addressed in *Philosophy in the Flesh*: they intervene in the sensorimotor experience, are the substance of primary and complex metaphors, are connected to human emotions and used as a medium in spiritual experiences. One wonders actually why professional philosophers reflecting on the processes involved in consciousness prefer inanimate objects for examples. And yet, the phenomenality and properties of flowers convey the prerogatives of an embodied philosophy, - embodied in the "flesh of the world" -, waiting for the human subject to grasp their patterns and the dormant metaphors of their sensuousness, fertility, transience and beauty.

The ways in which flowers influence human thought can be condensed in two hypostases: as natural beings and as parts of human cultures, translated into emblematic tools or vehicles, metaphors, visual art items, architectural models, objects of scientific inquiry. These two hypostases can hardly be separated: first, as in both cases their properties "make sense only relative to human functioning", to cite Lakoff and Johnson again (*Metaphors We Live By*, 164); second, because their material presence is necessarily transformed into meaning through metaphors, symbols, or scientific interpretations; third, as humans are not only natural, but essentially cultural beings, the interaction with flowers is always intermediated by a specific background and intentionality. Even botanists and geneticists, supposed to treat them as purely natural objects, interpose between themselves and flowers their scientific culture, their observational technology, their data processing machines, their professional idiom.

For millennia flowers have impacted human thought as natural objects passing through human senses, the place of encounter between the flesh of the world and the human flesh. Their qualities have impressed human sight, touch, smell and taste. Hearing seems to be excluded, as humans are not able to perceive the sounds flowers produce in their growth, in their undulating in the wind, or in their withering, but their silence to human ears has not been deprived of significance. Their voiceless explosion of beauty increases the sense of wonder at natural creativity, while their silent decay embarrasses the human loud cry against old age and death. The first striking property of flowers is color, which has undoubtedly refined the human capacity to think pictorially, that is in color combinations. Flower colors provoke different emotions, moods and states of mind and have contributed to conceive beauty as predicated on color harmony and color expression. There are many

other parts of nature beautifully colored; but it is impossible to touch the color of the dawn with the rosy fingers, evoked by Homer, or to preserve in some form, apart from its subjective rendering in art, the blue of the sky, as it is inaccessible, and it does not actually exist. Yet flower colors are within everybody's reach and can be used and perceived in complex ways that include other senses than sight. Thanks to flowers it is possible to touch, smell or taste yellow, crimson, blue, pink, violet, white, which opens a discourse on synesthesia as both a biological and an aesthetic phenomenon actualized in cross-sensory metaphors.

The fine petal texture and its lustre have refined both sight and the sense of touch and aided to think softness, delicacy, fragility as life features, associated in the human sphere with young age and women. This frailness hides though the flowers' strength, for their fine petals serve the purpose of attracting pollinators and ensuring fertility, and in this sense the analogy with young children and women seems to fit in a larger scheme of natural strategies to favor life continuity. The paradoxical overlapping of weakness and strength hidden in the visual and tactile qualities of flowers evokes another instance of dualism connected this time to human taste. Some flowers are sweet and edible, while others have drugging or toxic properties. Ingesting the former has exalted the association of taste with visual beauty and fragrance, while the latter has taught a lesson on the treacherous nature of attractiveness, on charm that can prove fatal, and on human vulnerability in front of diminutive elements of the environment. In a concise lesson of ethics, theology and herbalism, Friar Lawrence uses the example of a weak flower, in whose 'infant rind,/ Poison hath residence and medicine power', to complete a discourse on the inherent presence of good and evil in nature and in the human being (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.3.8-30). The potential death-bringing deception of some flowers versus the restoring and empowering qualities of others builds the reference framework in one of the famous chapters of Buddha's *Dhammapada*, where the colorful, scentless flowers stand for the fine, but empty words of those who do not enact goodness, while the richly perfumed flowers are the analog for virtuous people, whose good deeds emit a good odor that "travels even against the wind"(6-7).

Thanks to flowers mankind has discovered the delight or intoxication of pleasant scents. The extraction of essences from their petals has changed our sense of smell. Today the association of their fragrances to sensuousness is dominant, but in ancient cultures they were valued as empowering – pharaohs taking in the smell of the lily of the Nile appear in Egyptian reliefs and wall paintings – and as a means of communication with the divine: fumigations with flowers in ritual services gave rise to the word perfume, derived from the Latin *per fumum* (Goody, 33). Transcendence manifested in fragrance is one of the subtlest way of thinking the inebriating possession it takes of the human perception of the world, and of its ineffability, for like scent, it is a powerful presence to



consciousness, even if it is technically elusive to grasp and sight which mostly determine our sense of reality, orientation and the metaphors that express concepts.

If the impression of color, texture, perfume or taste on the human mind is subjective and the uses and symbols of flowers derived from it may be interpreted as mere convenience, the complex patterning of their corollas based on symmetry, proportion, geometrical figures and numbers have appeared in all cultures as objective miniature models of the world's hidden structure. Their symmetry arises on the floral apex, "in ordered patterns, basically in a centripetal sequence, as do the organs of the vegetative shoots", and in most cases flowers are poly-symmetric having several symmetry planes (Endress, 9). Their petal numbers, used to classify them in botany, together with their spiral growth models that illustrate the golden ratio and the Fibonacci sequence, are perceived as their participation in the intrinsic algorithmic encoding of the universe. For religious minds this is evidence of the divine order implanted both in nature and in the human mind, for philosophers it is an illustration of the idea that number is the key to understand both the microcosm- and the macrocosm design, while scientists find it intriguing that the golden ratio organizes matter in spiral galaxies, as well as in the sun-flower. In the Chinese culture, *The Mustard Seed Manual* explains the structure of the plum tree in bloom, as a compendium of the stratified universal order conceived by Daoists: "The symbolism (*xiang*) of the plum tree is determined by its *qi*. [the force that sets the world and everything in motion]. The blossoms are of the Yang principle, that of Heaven. The wood of its trunk and branches are of the Yin principle, that of Earth. Its basic number is five, and its various parts and aspects are based on the odd and even numbers. The peduncle, from which the flower issues, is a symbol of the Taiqi (the Ridgepole of the Universe, the Supreme Universe, the Absolute), and hence it is the upright form of the calyx. The part supporting the blossom is a symbol of the *Sancai* (Three Powers of Heaven, Earth and Man) and consequently is drawn with three sepals. The flower issuing from the calyx is a symbol of the *Wuxing* (Five Elements) and is drawn into five petals. The stamens growing in the centre of the flower are symbols of the *Qizheng* (Seven Planets: the five planets with the sun and the moon) and so are drawn numbering seven. When the flowers fade, they return to the number of the *Taiqi* and that is why the cycles of growth and decline of the plum tree are nine." (Sze 1956:404 in Goody, 362)

In addition to the morphology of flowers, their physiology and short-lived existence have produced interpretations of human nature and transience of life in all cultures where they have semantic value. Their fertility sustained by beauty has been a term of comparison for women's biological role and physical features. Reproduced in velvet and silk, the petal skin and women's skin have a long tradition of overlapping symbolism of sensuousness with the implicit allusions to love and procreation. Roses were associated with Venus in ancient Rome and they often symbolize Mary

in Christianity, a migration of symbols made possible because to the human observer the fertility of flowers aided by the visitation of bees and butterflies keeps them in an unaltered state of purity. Further elaborations of the analogy between flowers and female sexuality in a Christian context have produced the concept of deflowering, from the Old French *desflorer*, which meant initially to strip a garden of flowers, hence an implied violence on natural reproduction. The evolving of the metaphor discloses the paradoxical relationship with nature in Christianity, for plucking a flower means not allowing it to participate in the world's fertility, while a young girl being deflowered becomes a potentially fertile woman. An extreme outcome of this paradox resounds in Baudelaire's *malaise* expressed in his *Flowers of Evil*, a metaphor for his vitiated relationship to nature, his home and his mother, and the nostalgia of paradise transformed into adulterated agonizing encounters with women experienced as poisonous flowers.<sup>6</sup>

The transformation of flowers into fruits has been seen as the sacrifice of female beauty and youth for the sake of prolonging life. Sealed in Japan by the tradition of *hanami* - the cherry blossoms festivals -, this analogy took a different turn when it was 'militarized' and became an emblem of male kamikaze missions in the Second World War. In *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms and Nationalisms*, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney analyzes this metamorphose against the wide framework of Japanese cultural history, explaining the efficiency of this propaganda controlled analogy through the deeply rooted cultural habit of identification with the cherry blossoms, their at once vague and permutable field of significance, typical of metaphors, but also through the lightness of the flower sacrifice in nature, a quiet performance deprived of blood-shedding pathos.

The flowers' brief existence for the sake of life continuity enables thinking transience and perpetuity simultaneously and has been used as an implicit or explicit analog for the ways in which humans can continue their existence beyond biological life. Being a moral example is one of them. The ancient Chinese poet Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE), exiled by the king he desired to serve as councilor, committed suicide when his country was conquered, because his wise advice was ignored. He became an epitome of loyalty and moral integrity for the following generations and is still celebrated today, after more than 2 millennia in the dragon boat festival. Cultivation of virtues equates in his verse with tending flowers, as his famous poem *Li sao* ("On Encountering Trouble") proves:

I had tended many an acre of orchids,  
And planted a hundred rods of melilotus;  
I had raised sweet lichens and the cart-halting flower,  
And as arums mingled with fragrant angelica,  
And hoped that when leaf and stem were in their full prime,

---

<sup>6</sup> Quesnel, Michel, *Baudelaire Solaire et Clandestin, Les données singulières de la sensibilité et de l'imaginaire*, 9-18; Baudelaire, *A Self-Portrait, Selected Letters*, 130; Gretchen Schultz, *La Géante: Feminine Proportions and Lyric Subjectivity*, 36.

When the time had come, I could reap a fine harvest. (*Songs of the South*, 69)

Another way of counteracting the brevity of natural life is cultivating the spirit. Religious figures and doctrines make use of flower metaphors to express this concept, identifying a high level of spiritualization with the supreme human achievement. In Christianity Mary herself was conceived as a flower, whose womb led to the spiritual regeneration of the world. The most complex metaphorical field that connects flowers with religion or spiritual practices was developed in Egypt and India around the lotus. In ancient Egypt the lotus was the symbol of the sun, of life, immortality, resurrection and the reproductive essence of Osiris (Ward, 135). In India an exaltation of its spiritual powers is transversally present in all its major religions. Hinduism attributes it to all Brahmanic Gods and bases its cosmogony on the cosmic lotus that “supports the world above the chaotic waters of the universe,” and gives birth to the creator Brahma (Ward, 136-7). The incorruptible gold lotus of Brahma is *a well-ordered diagram of the world*: “The filaments of this great lotus are the innumerable great mountains of the world full of precious metals. The countries of foreign peoples exist on the outer petals of the lotus, and the place of demons and serpents is on the under-side of the petals. In the center there are four oceans that extend to the four quarters of the earth and within the center of these four oceans is the great continent of which India is a part”. In addition, the lotus is a tree of life, generative organ of the absolute, the permanence sustaining impermanence (Ward, 137). According to Buddhist narratives, “the lotus flower recognized and paid tribute to the child Buddha, for when he was born a lotus bloomed where he first touched the earth; he stepped seven steps northward and a lotus marked each step”(Ward, 140); later on this flower came to represent the condition of the Buddhist, rooted in the material world (the mud where the lotus has its roots), but rising above the waters of impermanence with a purified mind, ready to attain Nirvana. In yoga every chakra or energy center is typified as a lotus flower with a specific number of petals. The crown-chakra (Sahasrara chakra) at the top of the head is the place of encounter with the higher consciousness, with everything that is, with the divine, and is symbolized by the one thousand petal lotus.

Finally, creativity in all its forms has been associated with human flourish, as humans can transcend their limited existence not only by procreation, but also through momentary statements of beauty or intellectual insight that prolong their lives in the future. Sometimes these are solitary individual sparks, other times an entire community orchestrates its creative energies in a common flourish that marks a turn in its history and re-shapes its identity. An example is the city of Florence. Its name and emblem – the stylized *giaggiolo* -, its cathedral dedicated to the Santa Maria del Fiore, its foundation myth connected to the Roman fertility rituals of the Floralia, and its sophisticated tradition of flower metaphors in literature and visual arts passing through Dante's mystic rose and Botticelli's *Primavera*, are part of a larger metaphor of common thriving that pervaded its history in

the past and inspired its projects. If humans absorb the world through the senses and turn it into the virtual reality of metaphors, the reverse is equally true: metaphors can inspire humans to transform existence, or, as Lakoff and Johnson argue “metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies” (*Metaphors We Live By*, 156).

In recent times flowers have taught scientists significant lessons on nature’s patterns, its hidden workings and interconnections, but since times immemorial they have contributed to the expansion of human perception and sensitivity, shaping thus human thought. The metaphors they have inspired have offered one of the most enduring mirrors to human reality, in its longing for beauty, its sense of sacrifice, its duplicity, its frailty and transience, its capacity of self-transcendence and engagement with eternity. The cognizance of flowers becomes at the metaphorical level knowledge of the self, and just as flowers make sense biologically when regarded in an eco-system, the human self makes sense when related to the wholeness of existence. This is the point of encounter between Heidegger’s meditative thinking and creativity. After all, in his attempt to explain the essence of human being as meditative, the philosopher set aside logical discourse in favor of a quote from Johann Peter Hebel: “We are plants which – whether we like to admit it to ourselves or not – must with our roots rise out of the earth in order to bloom in the ether and bear fruit.” (Gelassenheit, 47).

## WORKS CITED

- Bateson, Gregory, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, rpt, 2000.
- Baudelaire, Charles, *Les Fleurs du mal*, edited with an introduction and notes by Graham Chesters, French Texts Series Editor: Edward Freeman, Bristol Classical Press, London, 1995.
- Baudelaire, Charles, Hyslop, Lois Boe and Hyslop Francis E., JR., (translators and editors), *Baudelaire, A Self-Portrait, Selected Letters*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Carroll, Lewis, Martin Gardner (editor), John Tenniel (illustrator), *The Annotated Alice. Alice's Adventures In Wonderland And Through The Looking-Glass*, London: Penguin Books, 1970
- Clark Andy, *Being There: Putting Brain, Body and World Together Again*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1998.
- Clark, Andy, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension*, Oxford: OUP, 2011
- Drori, Jonathan, *The beautiful Tricks of Flowers*, TED Talks, (Filmed Mar 2011, Posted Jul 2011).

- Endress, Peter K., *Diversity and Evolutionary Biology of Tropical Flowers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 9.
- Gibson James J., *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Hove and London: Psychology Press and Routledge, 1986/2014.
- Goody, Jack, *The Culture of Flowers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993,
- Hawkes, David, tr. *The Songs of the South, An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets*, London: Penguin Classics, 1985/2011.
- Heidegger, Martin, *What is Philosophy?*, a bilingual edition, transl. with an Introduction by J. T. Wilde, W. Kluback, New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1956.
- Heidegger, Martin, *Gelassenheit* (1959), *Discourse on Thinking*, tr. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund, with an Introduction by John M. Anderson, New York: Harper & Row, 1966.
- Herva, Vesa-Pekka, *Flower Lovers, after All? Rethinking Religion and Human-Environment Relations in Minoan Crete*, in *World Archeology*, Vol. 38, No. 4, Dec., 2006, pp. 586-598, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40024057>, Accessed: 04-07-2012 12:20 UTC
- Ingold Tim, *The Perception of the Environment; Essays in Livelihood*, London: Routledge, 2000.
- Lakoff, George, Johnson, Mark, *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- Lakoff, George, Johnson, Mark, *Philosophy in the Flesh, The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999.
- Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, tr. with Foreword and notes by Stephen Mitchell, New York, London: Harper Perennial, 1988/2006.
- Leakey, F.W., *Baudelaire and Nature*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969.
- Müller, Max F., (tr and ed), *Wisdom of the Buddha, The Unabridged Dhammapada*, Mineola: New York, Dover Publications, 2000.
- Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko, *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms, The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Quesnel, Michel, *Baudelaire Solitaire et Clandestin, Les données singulières de la sensibilité et de l'imaginaire*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1987.
- Schultz, Gretchen *La Géante: Feminine Proportions and Lyric Subjectivity*, in *Understanding "Les Fleurs du Mal"*, Critical Readings, edited by William J. Thompson, Foreword by Claude Pichois, Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1997, pp. 35-48.
- Seymour Simon, *The secret clocks: time senses of living things*, New York: Viking Press, 1979.
- Shakespeare, William, The Oxford Edition, *Complete Works*, (ed. W. J. Craig), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Silverstein, Alvin, Silverstein, Virginia B., Silverstein Nunn, Laura, *Clocks and Rhythms*, Springfield MO: Twenty-First Century Books, 1999.
- Ward, William E., *The Lotus Symbol: Its Meaning in Buddhist Art and Philosophy*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Special Issue on Oriental Art and Aesthetics (Dec., 1952), pp. 135-

146 Published by: Wiley on behalf of The American Society for Aesthetics Stable URL:  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/426039> Accessed: 27-10-2017 10:40 UTC