

'A GREEN THOUGHT IN A GREEN SHADE': Immaginario letterario e ambiente

A cura di Roberta Ferrari e Laura Giovannelli

*Atti del XII Convegno Internazionale
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In memoria di Mario Curreli e Tony Bareham

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'Ere any flower of earth's would blow': Swinburne's flower imagery

Giovanni Bassi

My paper explores the overgrowth, as it were, of floral images in Algernon Charles Swinburne's *oeuvre*. From *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865) and *Poems and Ballads* (1866) to his late collections, Swinburne's works are interspersed with depictions of flowers and, perhaps more significantly, with metaphors involving blossoms either as tenor or as vehicle. Swinburne's flower imagery falls into two large groups. Composed by words indicating a particular species or genus of flowers, the images of the first group are variously concerned with botanical detail and respond to the floral symbolisms that were popular at the time. The images of the second group are formed by modifying the hypernym 'flower' with a noun that is drawn from the semantic field of natural elements. Often symbols of Swinburne's mythopoeia, the snow-flowers, fire-flowers and foam-flowers are the most recurrent blossoms of this group.

Keywords: Swinburne; Victorian poetry and literature; flowers.

In his letter of 21 March 1866 to John Ruskin, 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 *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 floral sweetness 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

¹. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, edited by Cecil Y. Lang (New Haven, Yale U.P., 1959-62), vol. I, p. 160.



in his correspondence, focusing especially on wildflowers and common garden blossoms that he admired at home, in his neighbourhood or during his travels². 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 generally overlooked by critics and readers. Already structural to Swinburne's early poems, flower images infuse his entire oeuvre, becoming even more frequent and significant in the later works. Although extremely varied, these 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 – dimension³. Various 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 floral symbolisms and languages of flowers that

² See, for instance, *ibid.*, vol. V, p. 70; vol. 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.

³ See Carol T. Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 1975) and, for Victorian typology, Lothar Hönnighausen, *The Symbolist Tradition in English Literature: A Study of Pre-Raphaelitism and Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 1988), pp. 1-82.

were in vogue at the time⁴. 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 wine⁵.

The most popular language-of-flowers books of the century read the poppy as an emblem of consolation, oblivion, repose and sleep⁶. Swinburne deploys the flower to evoke these states – along with the other common association of the blossom with death – in the closing stanza of 'A Ballad of Death', where poppies are arranged with other plants as a votive offering to a personified Death. 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, the ancient Greeks

⁴ For Victorian floral symbolism see Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville and London, Virginia U.P., 1995).

⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, edited by Kenneth Haynes (London, Penguin Books, 2000), p. 137.

⁶ See for instance Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, pp. 188-89.



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), who was said to create poppies to assuage her sorrow for the rape of her daughter⁷. While it is somewhat obliquely connected with Proserpina (Persephone) in Ovid's *Fasti* (IV, 438), the flower is nevertheless explicitly associated with the goddess in an important literary source for Swinburne's poem. 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 grow in the 'Garden of Proserpina', an area visited by the hero Guyon in the Cave of Mammon⁸. 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 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' poppy⁹. 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'¹⁰. In this light, Swinburne's

⁷ See Angelo De Gubernatis, *La mythologie des plantes ou Les légendes du règne végétal* (Paris, Reinwald, 1882), vol. 2, 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).

⁸ Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*, edited by A.C. Hamilton et al. (London and New York, Routledge, 2013), p. 221. Although she quotes Spenser's passage in her discussion of poppies, Elizabeth Kent interestingly locates the plant in 'the garden of Mammon' and does not mention Proserpina. See Elizabeth Kent, *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower Garden* (London, Taylor and Hessey, 1823), p. 296.

⁹ Douglas Brooks-Davies, 'mysteries', in Albert Charles Hamilton (ed.), *The Spenser Encyclopedia* (Toronto, Toronto U.P., 1997), p. 486.

¹⁰ 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.

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 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 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.

'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 head¹¹.

¹¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 148.



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 shape¹². 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 derivative of the noun 'prick')¹³. As noticed by Jonathan Smith, the second line of the text begins to 'anthropomorphize' the sundew, thus stressing the animal qualities that were so disturbing to Swinburne's contemporaries¹⁴. 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 ('I have a secret halved with thee/The name that is love's name to me')¹⁵. The sundew, a species that was not usually included in sentimental flower books, assumes an individual and therefore puzzling set of meanings¹⁶.

In a few poems from a later collection, *A Century of Roundels* (1883), Swinburne openly plays on codified floral symbolism by exploiting the idiomatality of the names of the flowers. Each poem in the elegant dip-tych 'Flower-Pieces', a critically neglected display of bravura, focuses on a blossom whose name is formed with the noun 'love' followed by a verb

¹² See Jonathan Smith, 'Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne's "The Sundew" and Darwin's "Insectivorous Plants"', *Victorian Poetry* 41: 1 (2003), pp. 131-50.

¹³ See the *OED* entry for 'pricked', adj.2.

¹⁴ See Jonathan Smith, 'Une Fleur du Mal? Swinburne's "The Sundew" and Darwin's "Insectivorous Plants"', p. 133.

¹⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 149.

¹⁶ The dew-plant features in only one of the five flower lists combined in Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, pp. 176-77.

or prepositional phrase. The poet capitalises on the linguistic richness of these names, which are representative of a much-debated cluster of words 'which appear to be derived directly from phrases'¹⁷. 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 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 collection¹⁸.

The first poem of the diptych, 'Love Lies Bleeding', draws 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'¹⁹. The opening two lines sketch the scene: 'Love lies bleeding in the bed whereover/Roses lean with smiling mouths or pleading'²⁰. Following the iconographical and poetical commonplace of the

¹⁷ Laurie Bauer, *Compounds and Compounding* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 2017), p. 50.

¹⁸ Herbert F. Tucker, 'What Goes Around: Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels*', in Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (eds), *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2013), p. 130.

¹⁹ Jane Loudon (ed.), *Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants* (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1880), p. 1080.

²⁰ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1904), vol. V, p. 166.



wounded Cupid (see the adjective 'sore wounded' in line 8), Love 'lies' losing blood in a (flower?) bed circumscribed by feminised and animated roses²¹. (The presence of the roses may not be by chance: according to the myth, to quote from Robert Herrick's translation of *Anacreontea* 35, Cupid was stung by a bee 'as he laye amonge/Roses')²². If we read 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'²³. 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 him²⁴.

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 poem²⁵:

Light love in a mist, by the midsummer moon misguided,
Scarce seen in the twilight garden if gloom insist,
Seems vainly to seek for a star whose gleam has derided
Light love in a mist.

²¹. 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.

²². Robert Herrick, *The Complete Poetry of Robert Herrick*, edited by Tom Cain and Ruth Connolly (Oxford, O.U.P., 2013). vol. II, p. 180.

²³. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, p. 166.

²⁴. *Ibid.* See John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica, or The Language of Sentiments of Flowers*, p. 359. See 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'.

²⁵. Jane Loudon, *Ladies' Flower Garden, or Ornamental Annuals* (London, William Smith, 1840), p. 10.

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 mist²⁶.

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 lovers²⁷. The reference to a 'meaning' associated with the blossom patently alludes to the language of flowers, with the poem playing extensively with

²⁶ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, pp. 166-67.

²⁷ For these representations see Alison Syme, *A Touch of Blossom: John Singer Sargent and the Queer Flora of Fin-de-siècle Art* (University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State U.P., 2010), p. 8. Syme mentions a 'mid-century Valentine' that 'uses a blossom-womb to suggest the birth of Love'. See also Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, 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').



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 stanza²⁸.

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. 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'²⁹. 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 poem³⁰. 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')³¹, where the adjective 'deep' suggests the strikingly intense colour of the wild pansy, whereas 'lustre' and 'darkness' allude to its various and often contrasting shades³².

The second kind of Swinburne's floral imagery is far less varied, but 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

²⁸. John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica, or The Language of Sentiments of Flowers*, 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'.

²⁹. Catherine Maxwell, 'In the Artist's Studio', in Matthew Bevis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford, O.U.P., 2013), p. 735.

³⁰. Henry Phillips, *Floral Emblems*, p. 302.

³¹. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, p. 177.

³². See Robert Tyas, *The Sentiment of Flowers, or Language of Flora*, p. 317. There is no space here to discuss other remarkable examples of this first group of Swinburne's flower images, but 'Before a Mirror', 'Relics', 'The Year of the Roses', 'A Moss Rose' and 'Hawthorn Tide' should at least be seen.

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 of 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'³³. A postromantic blending of imagination and sensual experience, these elemental flowers stand out for their subjective and 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.

Swinburne's most frequent flower images appear in 'Love at Sea', a love lyric collected in *Poems and Ballads*³⁴. 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?³⁵

³³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, edited by Jerome McGann and Charles L. Sligh (New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2004), 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 Yisrael Levin (ed.), *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspectives on the Mature Work* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2010), p. 12 and Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*, p. 91.

³⁴ 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 unfinished novel *Lesbia Brandon* (Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 458).

³⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 145.



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?
 Ou bien dans la Norvège,
 Cueillir la fleur de neige,
 Ou la fleur d'Angsoka?³⁶

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'³⁷. 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), 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
 Whose kiss devours their tender beauty, and leaves
 But raindrops on the grass and sere thin leaves

³⁶. Théophile Gautier, *La comédie de la mort* (Paris, Desessart, 1838), p. 309.

³⁷. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 172.

That were engraven with traceries of the snow
Flowerwise ere any flower of earth's would blow³⁸.

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 snow³⁹. 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'⁴⁰.

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 evoked through the quasi-horticultural phrase 'snow of blossoms'⁴¹. 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

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 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), pp. 647-59; Yisrael Levin, 'Solar Erotica: Swinburne's Myth of Creation', in Id. (ed.), *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*, p. 61.

³⁹ See John R. Reed, 'Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*: The Poet-Lover's Song of Love', *Victorian Poetry* 4: 2 (1966), pp. 104-107.

⁴⁰ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, edited by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford, O.U.P., 2010), p. 39. See Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2011), pp. 37-39.

⁴¹ Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, edited by Stuart Curran (Oxford, O.U.P., 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), pp. 101-24.



that fall and cover the 'turf and the moss' of a dying untended garden are vividly likened to 'flakes of crimson snow'⁴². In this regard, many Victorian poems, such as Robert Browning's 'Women and Roses' and Christina Rossetti's 'A rose has thorns as well as honey', should also be mentioned.

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 blossoms⁴³. In 'Love at Sea', as we have seen, the compound 'fire-flowers' 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 poetry⁴⁴. 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'⁴⁵. 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*'⁴⁶. The information provided by Marsden, a British orientalist and scholar of the Malay language, is sufficient to explain Swinburne's transformation of

⁴² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1819-1820*, edited by Jack Donovan et al. (London and New York, Taylor & Francis, 2011), p. 309. For 'The Sensitive Plant' see Richard Cronin, 'The Sensitive Plant and the Poetry of Irresponsibility', in Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb (eds), *The Neglected Shelley* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2015), pp. 199-214. 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), pp. 150-54; Terry L. Meyers, 'Swinburne, Shelley, and *Songs Before Sunrise*', in Rikky Rooksby and Nicholas Shrimpton (eds), *The Whole Music of Passion* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1993), pp. 40-51; and Michael O'Neill, '"Stars Caught in my Branches": Swinburne and Shelley', in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (eds), *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2015), pp. 103-18.

⁴³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, p. 171.

⁴⁴ See Jean Richer, *Études et recherches sur Théophile Gautier prosateur* (Paris, Nizet, 1981), pp. 110-11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁶ William Marsden, *The History of Sumatra* (London, J. McCreery, 1811), p. 105.

'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 poetry⁴⁷. 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 name⁴⁸. The poet might have linked the *flamma sylvarum*, as the plant was called by the 17th-century botanist Georg Eberhard Rumphius, with a more imaginative blossom evoked by 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 sky⁴⁹. 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 invisible⁵⁰.

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 debatable⁵¹. 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

⁴⁷ See Francis Jacques Sypher, 'Swinburne and Wagner', *Victorian Poetry* 9: 1-2 (1971), p. 177.

⁴⁸ For the occurrences of the phrase in Gautier's *oeuvre* see Jean Richer, *Études et recherches sur Théophile Gautier prosateur*, pp. 111-13.

⁴⁹ This source is mentioned in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 359. There is not enough information to establish whether Hugo was influenced by Michel's translation.

⁵⁰ Victor Hugo, *Oeuvres poétiques*, edited by Gaëtan Picon and Pierre Albouy (Paris, Gallimard, 1964-1974), vol. I, p. 1083.

⁵¹ See Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 359.



19th-century botanical publications such as *The Botanical Register* and the *Herbier général de l'amateur*⁵². As pointed out in the *Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants*, *Pavetta* is a 'small genus nearly related to *Ixora*, with flowers usually white, as those of *Ixora* are red'⁵³. 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 confused⁵⁴ – and grows in the 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 flower⁵⁵. 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 Calcutta⁵⁶. 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 counterpart⁵⁷.

⁵². Sydenham Edwards (ed.), *The Botanical Register* (London, James Ridgway, 1817), vol. III, f. 198; Jean Loiseleur-Deslongchamps and Mordant de Launay, *Herbier général de l'amateur* (Paris, Audot, 1821), vol. V, f. 331.

⁵³. Jane Loudon (ed.), *Loudon's Encyclopædia of Plants*, 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), p. 570.

⁵⁴. See Arnaud Mouly *et al.*, '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), p. 686.

⁵⁵. John Lindley and Joseph Paxton, *Paxton's Flower Garden* (London, Bradbury and Evans, 1850-51), p. 111.

⁵⁶. William Roxburgh, *Flora Indica; or Descriptions of Indian Plants* (Calcutta, Thacker, 1874 [1832]), vol. III, pp. 126-27.

⁵⁷. 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-19th-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'.

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 otherworldly, spectral and heavenly, bodies. In 'Laus Veneris', one of 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 apparition⁵⁸. 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 capitalizes on it to apostrophize the recently deceased Armand Barbès, a French republican and opposer to the July monarchy. In 'Armand Barbès', a lyric included in *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) and aligned with the political and revolutionary subject-matter of the collection, the soul of the French 'hero' is compared to 'Fire out of heaven', a phenomenon resembling 'a flower of perfect fire'⁵⁹. 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 imagery⁶⁰. 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'⁶¹.

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,

⁵⁸ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. II, p. 109.

⁶⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1819-1820*, p. 301. For a strikingly similar passage in *Tristram of Lyonesse* (Canto 2) see Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 239.

⁶¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, edited by Kelvin Everest *et al.* (London and New York, Taylor & Francis, 2000), p. 604.



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 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’⁶². 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)⁶³. For this ability to capture the 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 phenomena⁶⁴. 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’⁶⁵. Although extended to represent the night life 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 ‘laurel’, in order to select the best floral offering for the French poet. At the end of this catalogue, Baudelaire’s favourite blooms are repre-

⁶². Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, 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), p. 195 and Yisrael Levin, *Swinburne’s Apollo: Myth, Faith and Victorian Spirituality* (Farnham and Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2013), pp. 130-52.

⁶³. Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 120. See Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Victorian Literature* (Manchester, Manchester U.P., 2009), pp. 80-88.

⁶⁴. For these transitional states in Decadent literature see Marion Thain, ‘Poetry’, in Gail Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to The Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, C.U.P., 2007), pp. 226-28.

⁶⁵. Arthur Symons, *Selected Early Poems*, edited by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge, MHRA, 2017), p. 102.

sented as 'half-faded fiery blossoms', sickly fire-flowers whose 'tropic' origin might allude to the exotic ancestry of this family of figurations⁶⁶. 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 influence⁶⁷. In this sense, I agree with Maxwell that Swinburne prefers, even in his poetry, wild or 'old-fashioned' garden flowers to exotic and ornamental blossoms⁶⁸. While there are neither orchids nor tuberose in Swinburne's oeuvre, the pervasive metaphorical flowers that represent natural forces may be generally counted as extremely wild blossoms.

As with the snow-flowers, one may find several images involving fire and flowers in Swinburne's contemporary poets. I shall limit myself to two examples, both taken from authors well-known to Swinburne and both 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')⁶⁹. 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'⁷⁰. These images, although carefully-handled, are not as visionary as Swinburne's most intricate figurations. While in these poems the flowers are unequivocally the target of the metaphor, in Swinburne they are often the source.

⁶⁶ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, p. 165.

⁶⁷ See Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton U.P., 1985), p. 56 and Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*, p. 101.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶⁹ Alfred Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, edited by Christopher Ricks (London and New York, Taylor & Francis, 2007), p. 41 (see also the note to these lines on the same page).

⁷⁰ Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by Jerome McGann (New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2004), p. 164.



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 surface⁷¹. A sign of the great originality of this imagery, the *OED* credits Swinburne with coining the compound 'foam-flower' in *Poems and Ballads* (1866)⁷². True as that may be, the impalpable and stimulating seafoam 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'⁷³. The Hellenic undertones of this line, which allude to the birth of Aphrodite, are indicative of the strongly mythopoeic character of Swinburne's marine flowers. Often structural to his poetical myth-making, 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 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

⁷¹. 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 this herb is apparently never mentioned throughout Swinburne's images, it goes without saying that adjectives like 'foamy' and 'snowy' have been used to describe white and soft inflorescences in both horticultural publications and poetry. See, for example, John Ruskin's false etymology of 'cyme' (a type of flower clusters) from the Greek *κῦμα* ('a swelling or rising wave') in his *Proserpina* (John Ruskin, *Love's Meinie and Proserpina*, edited by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn [London, George Allen, 1906], p. 306).

⁷². See the *OED* entry for 'foam', C1. a.

⁷³. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, p. 318. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Poems of Shelley 1817-1819*, p. 584.

inventively morphed into a specific flower, a white 'lily' floating on sterile and roaring billows⁷⁴.

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 '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'⁷⁵. 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 sunlight⁷⁶.

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'⁷⁷. The four demanding 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 adaptability of Swinburne's elemental flowers⁷⁸.

⁷⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads & Atalanta in Calydon*, pp. 31, 44, 162.

⁷⁵ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Major Poems and Selected Prose*, pp. 158–60.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁷⁷ John A. Walsh, "'Quivering Web of Living Thought": Conceptual Networks in Swinburne's *Songs of the Springtides*', in Yisrael Levin (ed.), *A.C. Swinburne and the Singing World: New Perspectives on the Mature Work*, p. 31.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.



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’⁷⁹. 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 Swinburne’s mythopoeia, 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* hair⁸⁰.

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 fricatives /s/ and /f/, enhances the opening sounds of the fundamental ingredients of Swinburne’s marine and solar myth (snow-fire-foam-sea-flower-sun-song).

⁷⁹. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. III, p. 309.

⁸⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 295; my emphasis.

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, to evoke the otherworldly environment of its caves. Also 'Off Shore', a poem included in *Studies in Song* (1880), stands out for 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 sunbeams penetrates deep into the feminised water, reaching the luxuriant seabed ('Its wild-weed forests of crimson and russet and olive and gold')⁸¹. As observed by Yisrael Levin in his brilliant analysis of the text, 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'⁸².

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'⁸³. As Swinburne remarks in his 1889 letter to the poet Emily Pfeiffer, gardens are a 'subject ... as inexhaustible as the sea', a comparison that is more meaningful if we observe how, in his poetry, both of them flower profusely⁸⁴.

⁸¹ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, p. 46.

⁸² Yisrael Levin, 'Solar Erotica: Swinburne's Myth of Creation', p. 61.

⁸³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, vol. V, pp. 51-52.

⁸⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Swinburne Letters*, vol. V, p. 264.



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