CONSTRUCTING THE NATURAL. A FEW REMARKS ON THE FLOWER LIST AS A DESCRIPTIVE DEVICE IN MODERN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper investigates comparatively the ways in which the flower list functions as a descriptive device in several modern literary works across different cultures, genres, and styles. These include Stéphane Mallarmé's *Les fleurs* (The Flowers), Henry Van Dyke's poem *Flood-Tide of Flowers*, the novel *La Faute de L'Abbé Mouret* (Abbé Mouret's Transgression) by Emile Zola, and Mircea Cărtărescu's novella *REM*. Each of these literary works creates a remarkably unitary *topos*, that of a *locus amoenus* evoking a long and prestigious tradition of representation in myth, literature, and painting.

Keywords: *comparative literature, description, archetypal criticism, Garden of Paradise*

One of the lists that Umberto Eco anthologizes in his recent *Vertigine della lista* (2009) is that of flowers which Zola puts together in his novel *La Faute de L'Abbé Mouret* (Abbé Mouret's Transgression) from 1875. The

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heading under which Eco places the luxurious description of the Paradou garden (obviously a slightly disguised reference to the Garden of Paradise) runs "The coherent excess". "Excess" because the effect created by the long and very detailed list of flowers is one of flamboyant profusion that overwhelms not only the protagonists of the episode, but the reader as well; "coherent", since the narrative manages to turn the excessive list into a spatial image that reminds one of earlier Renaissance allegories such as Botticelli's *La Primavera* (1482-85).

Zola's novel is one rather late example of the passion for representing flowers that even invented its own genre in painting. The art historian Sydney H. Pavière lists in his *Dictionary of Flower, Fruit, and Still Life Painters* (3 vols., 1962), hundreds of painters born between the 15th and the late 19th century (most of them being of course Flemish). From the Early Renaissance through Baroque, Romanticism, and up to Impressionism, painters illustrative for all artistic movements and schools approached this theme, sometimes exclusively, like Jan van Huysum (1682-1749), other times just accidentally, as with Caravaggio.

How is this fascination to be explained, besides the inertia of generic conventions? We shall look from an answer in several modern poems and narratives that took up the theme of flowers as a synecdoche for the garden of Paradise, and treated it by using the device of enumeration/ list. Let us give some quotations first, in chronological order.

"Des avalanches d'or du vieil azur, au jour/ Premier et de la neige éternelle des astres/ Jadis tu détachas les grands calices pour/ La terre jeune encore et vierge de désastres,// Le glaïeul fauve, avec les cygnes au col fin,/ Et ce divin laurier des âmes exilées/ Vermeil comme le pur orteil du séraphin/ Que rougit la pudeur des aurores foulées,// L'hyacinthe, le myrte à l'adorable éclair/ Et, pareille à la chair de la femme, la rose/ Cruelle, Hérodiade en fleur du jardin clair,/ Celle qu'un sang farouche et radieux arrose !// Et tu fis la blancheur sanglotante des lys/ Qui roulant sur des mers de soupirs qu'elle effleure/ A travers l'encens bleu des horizons pâlis/ Monte rêveusement vers la lune qui pleure !// Hosannah sur le cistre et dans les encensoirs,/ Notre Dame, hosannah du jardin de nos limbes !/ Et finisse l'écho par les célestes soirs,/ Extase des regards, scintillement des nimbes !// Ô Mère qui créas en ton sein juste et fort,/ Calices balançant la future fiole,/ De grandes fleurs avec la balsamique Mort/ Pour le poète las que la vie étiole."[2] (Stéphane Mallarmé, *Les fleurs*, 1864-66).

[2] "From golden showers of the ancient skies,/ On the first day, and the eternal snow of stars,/ You once unfastened giant calyxes/ For the young earth still innocent of scars:// Young gladioli with the necks of swans,/ Laurels divine, of exiled souls the dream,/ Vermilion as the modesty of dawns/ Trod by the footsteps of the seraphim;// The hyacinth, the myrtle gleaming bright,/ And, like the flesh of woman, the cruel rose,/ Hérodiade blooming in the garden light,/ She that from wild and radiant blood arose!// And made the sobbing whiteness of the lily/ That skims a sea of sighs, and as it wends/ Through the blue incense of horizons, palely/ Toward the weeping moon in dreams ascends!// Hosanna on the lute and in the censers,/ Lady, and of our purgatorial groves!/ Through heavenly evenings let the echoes answer,/ Sparkling haloes, glances

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"She took him first to the grotto. Deep within a clump of poplars and willows gaped a cavern, formed by rugged bits of rocks which had fallen over a basin where tiny rills of water trickled between the stones. The grotto was completely lost to sight beneath the onslaught of vegetation. Below, row upon row of hollyhocks seemed to bar all entrance with a trellis-work of red, yellow, mauve, and white-hued flowers, whose stems were hidden among colossal bronze-green nettles, which calmly exuded blistering poison. Above them was a mighty swarm of creepers which leaped aloft in a few bounds; jasmines starred with balmy flowers; wistarias with delicate lacelike leaves; dense ivy, dentated and resembling varnished metal; lithe honeysuckle, laden with pale coral sprays; amorous clematideae, reaching out arms all tufted with white aigrettes. And among them twined yet slenderer plants, binding them more and more closely together, weaving them into a fragrant woof. Nasturtium, bare and green of skin, showed open mouths of ruddy gold; scarlet runners, tough as whipcord, kindled here and there a fire of gleaming sparks; convolvuli opened their heart-shaped leaves, and with thousands of little bells rang a silent peal of exquisite colours; sweetpeas, like swarms of settling butterflies, folded tawny or rosy wings, ready to be borne yet farther away by the first breeze. It was all a wealth of leafy locks, sprinkled with a shower of flowers, straying away in wild dishevelment, and suggesting the head of some giantess thrown back in a spasm of passion, with a streaming of magnificent hair, which spread into a pool of perfume" (Emile Zola, *Abbé Mouret's Transgression*, 1875, transl. by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly; Book II, chapter VII).

"The laggard winter ebbed so slow/ With freezing rain and melting snow,/ It seemed as if the earth would stay/ Forever where the tide was low,/ In sodden green and watery gray.// But now from depths beyond our sight,/ The tide is turning in the night,/ And floods of color long concealed/ Come silent rising toward the light,/ Through garden bare and empty field.// And first, along the sheltered nooks,/ The crocus runs in little brooks/ Of joyance, till by light made bold/ They show the gladness of their looks/ In shining pools of white and gold.// The tiny scilla, sapphire blue,/ Is gently seeping in, to strew/ The earth with heaven; and sudden rills/ Of sunlit yellow, sweeping through,/ Spread into lakes of daffodils.// The hyacinths, with fragrant heads,/ Have overflowed their sandy beds,/ And fill the earth with faint perfume,/ The breath that Spring around her sheds./ And now the tulips break in bloom!// A sea, a rainbow-tinted sea,/ A splendor and a mystery,/ Floods o'er the fields of faded gray:/ The roads are full of folks in glee,/ For lo, – today is Easter Day!" (Henry Van Dyke, *Flood-Tide of Flowers*, 1916).

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of rapturous love!// Mother, who in your strong and righteous bosom,/ Formed calyxes balancing the future flask,/ Capacious flowers with the deadly balsam/ For the weary poet withering on the husk" (*The Flowers*, transl. by Henry Weinfield).

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"There was no room in the house where you could rest because of the flowers. On the top floor of the house in Egor's room you felt you were suffocating: there were white and red lilies, fully open and spilling out pollen from their stamens, there were yellow roses, piles of snapdragons, alder flowers, bluish chamomiles on tangled stalks. There were blooming cacti and other twisted flowers, blue and red, poking out their sticky tongues, orchids whose names I didn't know and saw then for the first time. A sundew flower of unearthly beauty swam in a pot filled with muddy dirt: its corolla of fine needles ending in drops of transparent liquid, flared out in the room's penumbra. 'It's a carnivorous plant,' the Long One told us and sat down in his usual chair. (…) He knew now. I was, without a doubt, the chosen one, I would penetrate REM. 'Look, all these flowers are for you. People came to bring them from everywhere, to wish you, through me, success. They have been waiting for you for a long time, they come every year, they look at my mother and me as REM's priests. But they all know that none of them could ever gain access to REM. Because REM, the only one in this world, was made only for the one who dreams the dreams, that is, only for you'" (Mircea Cărtărescu, *REM*, 1989, transl. by Julian Semilian).

Apparently the only thing that these texts have in common seems to be their use of the flower list. Otherwise they belong to different genres (poetry and prose), to various literary movements (Symbolism, Naturalism, Postmodernism). Their axiological status is quite diverse (Mallarmé whose work had a deep influence on modern poetry cannot be compared to the minor religious poet Van Dyke; the place of this particular novel in Zola's cycle of *Les Rougon Macquart* varied considerably as regards both the readers' and the critics' reaction to it). Yet not only the device as such, but the rich symbolism and the complex of motifs associated with it deserve a thorough analysis.

A promising approach to our corpus might come from archetypal criticism. The connection between floral imagery and the rebirth of nature and of the senses in spring is a long-established one in cultural history. According to Northrop Frye's definition in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, the archetype is a typical and recurrent image that moves from one text to another and thus unifies our representation of the literary system. Flowers have long been associated with the garden of Paradise. Among them, the rose fulfills an important function. Frye shows that it is a symbol of the paradisiacal communion. This symbolic unity does not prevent each writer to develop his own associations. For Mallarmé, the rose is ambiguous ("pareille à la chair de la femme, la rose/ Cruelle, Hérodiade en fleur du jardin clair"[3]); a feminine attribute *par*

[3] "And, like the flesh of woman, the cruel rose,/ Hérodiade blooming in the garden light".

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excellence[4], it evokes here pain and suffering by means of Hérodiade's image. (Jean-Pierre Richard (1961) analyses this spectacular Mallarméan name – first appearing in this poem – as a superposition of *héros* and *rose*, the rose suggesting "la valeur erotique, l'ardeur"[5] of female sexuality.) In Zola's novel, Virgin Mary is crowned with a garland of white roses, thus moving away from this line of associations and constructing instead a representation of purity. In chapter VI from Book II, the two lovers Serge and Albine enter a wild garden/ forest of roses that functions as a threshold to the splendid Paradou garden; again the woman is viewed here as "a large rose, a pallid rose that had opened since the morning".

The lily is another rich floral symbol. "La blancheur sanglotante des lys" reiterates the contrast between red and white so typical of Mallarmé's color imagery. In Cărtărescu's novella the lilies are white and red too. For Jean-Pierre Richard, the red lily (see also "le glaïeul fauve" counterpoised to the whiteness of the lily) triggers two kinds of connections: "fleur blanche et lunaire (…), le lys se lie aux themes de chasteté (…) ou d'idealité"[6], and at the same time evokes the marriage of red and white, of spirit and flesh/ blood (Richard 196: 48).

The lily is also the central symbol of the annunciation. It is thus a metonymy for the Virgin Mary, represented in medieval theology as the pure image of a *hortus conclusus.* In Botticelli's paintings the pagan deities (Venus in *The Birth of Venus*, Flora in *La Primavera*) are surrounded by roses whereas the compositions of his Madonnas (*The Annunciation* in Uffizzi and the one in Glasgow) are of course organized around the symbol of the lily. The celestial association of this flower with the moon is also important, thus reinforcing its feminine symbolism.

The particular significance of each flower "depicted" in these texts is definitely relevant; but what strikes the reader more is the juxtaposition of so many floral images. One aspect of these descriptions involves the presence of exotic flowers. This exoticism is twofold: temporal (the classic, powerful images of the laurel, the myrtle, the jasmine, or the hyacinth); and spatial (notice the wisterias, clematideae, cacti, orchids, sundew flowers, in Zola and Cărtărescu's prose pieces).

How can we account for this profusion of floral images? Its prototype lies within the Renaissance and Baroque patterns of floral representations. Some of the most powerful illustrations of this device are Botticelli's already mentioned *La Primavera* and Arcimboldo's allegories *Flora* (ca. 1591) and *Spring* (1573).

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4 "La rose et le lys sont des fleurs usuellement convoquées par les poètes pour parler de la femme en général"/ The rose and the lily are the flowers usually employed by poets in order to signify femininity (Jean-Michel Gouvard, "Du symbolisme en poésie ou comment expliquer *Les Fleurs* de Mallarmé" ; my transl.).

5 "The erotic value, the ardor" (my transl.)

6 "A white and moon flower, the lily is connected to the themes of chastity and ideality" (my transl.).

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Figure 1: Sandro Botticelli, *La Primavera*, 1482-1485



Figure 2: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Flora*, ca. 1591

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Figure 3: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *Spring*, 1573

Botticelli's masterpiece *La Primavera* has been analyzed in Cristina Acidini's comprehensive study *La primavera perfetta. Storia dei fiori a Firenze tra arte e scienza* (2010). The author notices that 198 blooming plants have been counted in the painting, 138 of which have been accurately identified. They all compose "lo smagliante giardino profano"[7] (Acidini 2010: 82) depicted by the Renaissance artist that baffled generations of interpreters. This inventory was seemingly the result of a careful botanical documentation. "Un simile catalogo botanico non può certo considerarsi casuale"[8] (*ibid.*, 86), remarks Acidini. Yet to what function is it displayed here? After revising several other

[7] "dazzling lay garden" (my transl.).
[8] "such a botanical inventory cannot be considered fortuitous" (my transl.).

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critical opinions, Acidini's interpretation insists on Botticelli's legitimizing intention that associates the Medici's rule to a perfect spring for the city of Florence. In our context I would pick up another suggestion from this book, one that contrasts the verisimilitude of the floral representations (proven by the painter's documentation and "realist" depiction) to the conventions of the mythological subject. The artificiality of so many flower species put together in the same "natural" setting signals that the viewer should be prepared to accept the construction of a landscape that transcends habitual perceptions. The coherence and power of a mythical structure presents itself to the audience and appeals to the anthropological force of the archetype. Therefore not the spatial relations are significant here but the background narrative that supports them. Diverse mythological elements are juxtaposed in the same manner as the floral species that are represented, in order to construct a *topos* of the second degree, unnatural but highly desirable.

The same holds true, if only partially, for Arcimboldo's allegories. In a wonderful essay on this subject, Roland Barthes emphasized the metonymic and narrative character of the painter's composed heads. "Le parti del linguaggio sono tramutate in oggetti: allo stesso modo, quelle che Arcimboldo dipinge non sono propriamente cose, ma piuttosto la descrizione parlata che ne farebe un narratore meraviglioso"[9] (Barthes 2005: 20). The allusion to the creative force of Adamic language is apparent here. We are entering a world of fairytale and myth. Yet its condition is unstable: "Queste Teste Composte sono teste che si decompongono"[10] (*ibid*., 42). The effect created by these representations (or better put, constructions) is morbid and repulsive. These images seem to be provisional gatherings of disparate elements; instead of imposing a coherent whole on the viewer, they suggest a permanent metamorphosis of their structuring pieces. For Barthes, this would be a sign of Arcimboldo's modernity.

The modern literary texts mentioned above share with these paintings the narrative device of the list (which is of course more appropriate to literary than to pictorial language). On a thematic level, this rhetorical device becomes part of a complex of images and motives that are prone to an archetypal critical reading. In what follows we shall examine the characteristic features of these spatial representations, the human presence within them, and the meanings and values with which they could be associated.

The space that contains this floral imagery has cosmic or primeval dimensions. Mallarmé's poem is an account of cosmogony ("ancient skies", "on the first day", "young earth"). The scenery is elementary (horizons, moon, skies, stars, dawns, heavenly evenings). This setting displays a permanent

[9] "The linguistic elements are transformed into objects: in the same manner, what Arcimboldo is depicting are not actually things, but rather the verbal description made by a wondrous narrator". (my transl.)

[10] "These Composed Heads are heads that decompose themselves". (my transl.)

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metamorphosis of the inanimate into the animate ("Young gladioli with the necks of swans", "She that from wild and radiant blood arose", "the sobbing whiteness of the lily"); and a permanent descending and ascending move ("eternal snow of stars", "Toward the weeping moon in dreams ascends"). Also the poem evokes several times movements of opening and closing related to the floral theme (suggested by: "unfastened giant calyxes", "the cruel rose… blooming", "Sparkling haloes", "withering").

Flood-Tide of Flowers records on a more limited level (but still a cosmic one) the temporal passing from winter to spring. The elements of the landscape are pure and simple, representing nature's perfection: the earth ("garden bare and empty field", "sandy beds"), the water (as rain, snow, tide, floods, pools, lakes, sea, etc.), the air ("fragrant", "breath", "faint perfume"), and the light ("color", "shining", "sunlit yellow", "rainbow"). The poet establishes two sets of associations: night – winter – death – dark – sterility, and, conversely, day – spring – rebirth – light. The dual imaginary is reinforced by the dominant use of colors. The dark ones (together with the aquatic images from the first stanza) suggest melancholy and death, whereas the motive of the nurturing light is captured by bright, shiny colors in the rest of the poem.

The primordial setting, though still present, is far more fragile in the prose pieces. Here the opposition between modern human civilization and the purity of nature is clearly if only indirectly established. There is a border than separates the floral kingdom from the ordinary world. In an emblematic scene from Zola's novel, when Serge and Albine are entering the garden of Paradou, they have to find their way through an environment that seems to test them: "the grotto was completely lost to sight beneath the onslaught of vegetation"; "row upon row of hollyhocks seemed to bar all entrance"; "flowers, whose stems were hidden among colossal bronze-green nettles, which calmly exuded blistering poison…". Ingrid Daemmrich finds in the description of this garden most of the essential elements that form "the landscape of mythological paradises": "Green trees and other flora, interspersed with multi-colored flowers, blue water and sky, high mountains and walls" (Daemmrich 1997: 76). Yet the garden "has only one season. With the approach of fall, it and its once blissful inhabitants fall victim to decay, estrangement, and death" (*ibid*., 75).

Furthermore, in Cărtărescu's novella the flowers are no longer alive in nature, but brought by people as an offer to whom they picture as their redeemer. The natural landscape has been replaced here by a house the rooms of which are packed with flowers, thus creating an effect of suffocation and ostentatiousness. Moreover the flowers are somehow aggressive and dangerous.

The relationship between the setting and the human presence that animates it is a complex one, in all these instances. What strikes the reader is the religious (or better put, in some instances, sacred or mystical) theme that pervades the representation of the natural milieu.

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According to Jean-Michel Gouvaurd's reading of *Les Fleurs*, the poem points to several mythical as well as Christian symbols. The laurel and the hyacinth stand for the stories of Daphné and Hyacinthos, both in connection with the Apollonian motive: "le laurier renvoie à la métamorphose de Daphné (dont le nom signifie « laurier » en grec), laquelle demanda à son père de la transformer afin d'échapper à Apollon qui la poursuivait de ses assiduités. Celui-ci, dépité, fit alors du laurier sa plante favorite. Quant à l'hyacinthe, elle évoque la mort de Hyacinthos: ce jeune homme, dont Apollon était amoureux, fut mortellement blessé alors qu'il s'exerçait à lancer le disque (…), et de son sang répandu surgit l'hyacinthe"[11]. The Christian tradition adds its own elements to this symbolic complex: "the seraphim", "the blue incense of horizons", the image of Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and being greeted by the people (suggested by "Hosannah"), and the figure of the Virgin Mary in the last two stanzas of the poem. To all these motives we can add that of *l'Aurore*, for which we should turn to the French original ("comme le pur orteil du séraphin/ Que rougit la pudeur des aurores foulées"). Jean-Pierre Richard comments upon the ambiguous, sensorial image of the goddess in this Mallarméan poem (Richard 1961: 120), in line with Hérodiade's complex figure and also with the whole structure of the poem.

The religious code is far more obvious with Van Dyke. Himself a Catholic priest, the author connects the renaissance of nature to the Easter holiday and thus assigns a Christian meaning to a natural phenomenon. The conventional ending provides a cultural explanation to the mystery of nature's revival, that earlier in the poem could have suggested the image of Spring as a "pagan" deity ("The breath that Spring around her sheds"). Also, the association between heaven and earth in the fourth stanza might indicate the *topos* of terrestrial paradise.

In Zola's novel the religious universe is constructed at the plot and character level. Serge is a young priest who lives an idyllic love story with the innocent Albine, a kind of *Primavera* herself, though a mortal one. The purity of their relationship reminds one of Adam and Eve before the Fall and surpasses all the limitations of conventional, hypocritical moral codes: "Thus Albine and Serge strolled on together in the sunlight for the first time. A balmy fragrance floated in their wake, the very path on which the sun had unrolled a golden carpet thrilled with delight under their feet. Between the tall flowering shrubs they passed like a vision of such wondrous charm that the distant paths seemed to entreat their presence and hail them with a murmur of admiration, even as

[11] "The laurel points to Daphné's metamorphosis (whose name signifies 'laurel' in Greek). She asked her father to transform her so that she might escape Apollon who was chasing her. The vexed god made the laurel his favorite plant. As for the hyacinth, it evokes the death of Hyacinthos : this young man, whom Apollon was in love with, was mortally wounded when he was practising disk throwing (…), and from his spread blood the hyacinth arose". (my transl.)

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crowds hail long-expected sovereigns. They formed one sole, supremely lovely being. (…) And slowly they passed along clothed with sunlight — nay, they were themselves the sun — worshipped by the low bending flowers" (book II, chapter VII). Afterwards, Albine's death leads to the decay of this paradisiacal garden.

The transcendent element in *REM* has more of a metaliterary character. The sense of the protagonist's mission, a young girl who plays fantastic, surreal games with her friends and dreams a series of almost mythical dreams, is to meet REM's creator. She is prepared for this goal (which she eventually attains) by a writer-priest, Egor, and his mother ("the long Ones" living in an usual tower at the outskirts of Bucharest). After a long initiation – that also signifies the passage from childhood to adolescence – the little girl meets the Creator who is actually (and disruptively) the writer of her tale.

Besides thematizing the religious element, these texts also make use of the motive of innocence and its loss. Following a long mythical tradition, it takes an innocent creature to reach Paradise. Most often there are feminine figures that represent this ideal of purity and peace. Yet the *topos* is highly unstable. "Familiarity with paradise destroys its purity and attractiveness", notes Daemmrich (1997: 114) in her thorough study on the paradise motif. The dialectic of innocence and violence, of the successful quest and the loss is a central aspect of paradisiacal constructions.

The recourse to many of the elements that build up the archetype of the Garden of Paradise is furthermore supplemented by an important theme: that of the artistic representation as such. This occurs on various levels: the images of the poet (with Mallarmé) or the writer (with Cărtărescu); the device of enumeration as such, through which nonsimultaneous elements are brought together in the same setting; the artificiality and the constructedness of the paradisiacal *topos*, that could only exist and be preserved by its artistic expression. The magic performed by these texts through devices and motives such as those we have analyzed above consists in pretending to function mimetically with respect to an utopian world. A *locus amoenus* is by its very "nature" indicible, unrepresentable (a challenge that explains the "vertigo" of the list, in Eco's terms). Employing a variety of constructive techniques, these modern literary texts reinvent an ancient myth and at the same time manifest the cognitive power of the artistic creation.

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