FLOWER LEXICON, METAPHOR AND IMAGERY IN ANTONIA POZZI'S *PAROLE*

BARBARA CARLE

WHAT can still retain our interest in the work of the Milanese poet besides the fact that she committed suicide at the age of twenty-six? [1] If we consider her *Parole* a "diario in poesia" (Cenni 7), we diminish the literary experience that transcends the diary format. Montale had already made the distinction between reading Pozzi's work as the "diario di un'anima" or a "libro di poesia" (49). He preferred the latter because of the extraordinary cohesion and "agevolezza" of her poetry (Montale 50). Her gracefulness masked the deliberate control behind the texts. Antonia Pozzi's poems move from simile, comparison, and analogy in the early stages (1929-32), towards metaphor, greater compactness and more concise intensity in the later pieces (1933-38). It has been noted that Pozzi succeeds in casting off early Crepuscular influences and sentimental modes in order to assert a more focused and perhaps more hermetic vision through chosen objects – frequently flowers or mountains, in the "Linea lombarda" manner. [2] Pozzi evolves towards a "poesia in re" that is, a poetry whose words correspond to selected objects that reflect internal moods and schisms (Baffoni-Licata 358). Among the distinct traits that color *Parole* we observe the brevity of most texts, the absence of rhyme, the marked presence of a dialogic "tu" that disperses the

[1] Antonia Pozzi's *Parole* was published posthumously for the first time in 1939 and then enjoyed three successive Mondadori editions, the second and third prefaced by Eugenio Montale in 1948 and 1964. As Alessandra Cenni points out in her Introduction to the 1989 Garzanti edition of *Parole*, at first the book received much critical acclaim and was even translated into five languages, but with time commanded increasingly less attention.

[2] Both Alessandra Cenni and Laura Baffoni-Licata have pointed out Pozzi's evolution towards a more concise, "authentic" style. See Cenni, Introduzione, 9 and Baffoni-Licata, "La meteora esistenziale e poetica di Antonia Pozzi," 358.

poet's voice, the use of endecasillabi at the beginning and end as well as a select repertory of themes: *fuga*, *montagna*, *notte*, *morte*, *sogno*, *bambino*, and *fiori*. The manner in which these themes are treated is often complex and unusual. In "La notte inquieta," for example, the image of dawn is a menacing and disturbing inevitability after the respite of night: "Le case vogliono/pause di sonno/a occhi chiusi nel tremante silenzio:/ma passi/ancora/nascono agli svolti,/l'alba come una foglia/dissepolta c'insegue." Likewise her use of flower metaphors, commonplace in poetry since Antiquity, is particularly rich and multi-faceted. Although the flower is at times used as a conventional symbol of joy, sexuality and fertility, it is also often chosen, antithetically, to suggest death, sterility, mutilation and loss of identity.

It will not be possible here to examine in depth all the various dimensions of Pozzi's flower images, but I will nevertheless try to give a comprehensive view of their significance and pervasiveness in her work. The poems that are typically "programatic" in this context will be considered. Out of the 250 poems that make up *Parole*, about a third contain floral figures and lexicon (82 poems). In her Introduction to *Parole* Alessandra Cenni devotes a rich paragraph to this distinctly visual dimension of Pozzi's work (she mentions Cézanne) and compiles a catalogue of the various specimens that range from *garofani*, *azalee* and *viole* to *mughetti*, *crisantemi* and *anemoni*.

> I ciclamini e i crochi ("Bontà inesausta"), i selvaggi garofani ("Sole d'ottobre"), le mute azalee ("Assenza"), le pallide viole e i rododendri, i papaveri, i colchici, i giaggioli sono i fiori più inquietanti del suo giardino chiuso (altro tema Rilkiano e dickinsoniano anche). "Un immensa città di fiori/sepolta" sorge da una tavolozza di accordi tonali, per una tecnica divisionista per tinte compatte e a densa campitura come nelle frutta di un Cézanne. L'ansia di decantazione la porta altrove al chiarismo; prevalgono gli azzurri (pervinche, genziane, glicini) sfumanti nei mughetti e nei chiari crisantemi tra i brividi squillanti degli anemoni ("All'amato"). Fiorture naturali e inaccessibili crescono lungo strade allegoriche che eternamente salgono per una "fuga di cancelli/ chiusi" ("Giardino chiuso"): un "viale bianco" ("Domani"), un "esile sentiero" dove è "libera/e sola per sempre" ("Incantesimi"). (16)

However, Cenni neglects to mention some of the most important flowers from her list insofar as they inscribe the floral motif in a long intertextual tradition: the *ninfee*, *ginestre* and *asfodeli*, to mention a few. All of these have illustrious literary ancestors. The *ninfee* recall Verlaine's "nénuphars" and Monet's famous paintings while the ginestre of "Spa-

zioso autunno" have a Leopardian resonance. The beautiful asphodels of "Fiabe" also covered the meadows of Homer's underworld in book XI (l. 573) of the *Odyssey* and recur in several D'Annunzian pieces ("L'ulivo" and "Le stirpi canore" in *Alcyone*).

Out of the 82 "floral" poems only about twenty associate flowers with joy and fulfillment (i.e., "Alba," "Confidare," "Echi" etc...). Stars and children are "flowers" in several poems. The coupling of flower and child imagery is joyous in one or two pieces such as "Notturno invernale" ("Fanciullo fanciullo, [...] sono i tuoi puri occhi/due meravigliose corolle/sbocciate a lavarmi lo sguardo") but moreoften it suggests an interrupted spring or ruined hope as in "Bambino morente" or "S. Maria in Cosmedin" where the church flowers perform the funereal service of "consecrating" the "dead child" or "povero sogno" ("piccola chiesa nata/per infiorarsi/all'alba/di serenelle bianche – /nata per le nozze/ dell'anima/o per le esequie di un bimbo.../Custodisci ora tu/nella penombra cerea/ dei tuoi marmi/ questo bambino morto ch'io reco –/ questo povero/sogno – consacralo tu/sul tuo altare.") The presence of asphodels along with the shattered rainbows render the fantastical ascent of the poet and child to the realm of the wind ambiguous in "Fiabe:" ("Vai a un reame di vento, [...] e le capanne abbandonate/fra le miosotidi,/le pianure/d'asfodeli in cima alle rocce – /porte che si spalancano su tesori sepolti,/arcobaleni che giacciono/infranti nei laghi –"). In other poems such as "Brughiera," the periwinkles and freshly blossomed cherry trees of parts I and II seem to offer the hope of joy but in the third part the peach trees and wisterias are associated with unfulfilled desire: "Indugiano/carezze non date/fra le dita dei peschi/e gli sguardi/d'amore che mai non avemmo /s'appendono alle glicini sui ponti –." The stars are flowery harbingers of death in "Morte delle stelle" and "La terra" while in "Spazioso autunno" they are "i visi delle ginestre morte." In most of the remaining texts the imagery is clearly negative. Titles such as "Disperazione," "Paura," "Sterilità," "Maledizione," "Tristezza dei colchici," "Cimitero di paese," "Minacce," "Assenza," "Esclusi," and "Maggio desiderio di morte" confirm the unhappy perspective. Flowers are "uprooted" objects destined towards dissolution; they reflect a crisis of identity or unfulfilled desire.

These uprooted flowers echo well-known myths as in "L'Anapo" or "Ninfee." Alessandra Cenni distinguished the "Ophelian waters" in many poems. But the repeated association of the flower and crisis of

identity, the uprooted being who then "drowns" into another dimension of existence comes from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. In the Homeric Hymn and in other myths Persephone, Europa and Oreithyia were abducted while plucking flowers. These myths suggested the anguish and difficulties caused by arranged marriages and the passage from virginity to womanhood. It has also been pointed out that they depicted the rupture of the mother-daughter bonds. (Foley 104) Certainly this is the case in the *Hymn to Demeter*. Persephone is an unwilling bride and Demeter's grief causes a famine on Earth. Persephone is abducted by Pluto just as she plucks the narcissus. [3] In Antonia Pozzi's "Fuga" the narcissus also suggests fragility in the face of more powerful natural forces, in this case the wind: "Gracili volti porgono i narcisi/ alla ventata." The fragile lilly is also ravished by the wind in "Sonno e risveglio della terra:" "e sei giglio/improvviso sul bordo di una forra,/quando fresca nel vento/ti solleva/ la tua rossa brughiera." The Persephone-Demeter myth is present in numerous other texts, as in "Secondo amore" where although the hope of a new love is celebrated, images of "lost spring" and exhumed flowers are paradoxically repeated: "domandavo agli oggetti muti,/ alle radici dei fiori divelti,/ [...] il perché del morire /Mi rispondeva la terra, [...] con una pallida primula/rifiorita. E in essa [...] tutte le primavere perdute,/ in ogni fiore vivo la bellezza/ degli innumeri fiori spenti. [...] se dalla morte io rinasco/ oggi – per te,/me stessa offrendo/ alle tue mani – come /una corolla/di dissepolte vite."

Although there are clearly many possible intertexts suggested by Pozzi's floral poems, such as Pascoli's "Il gelsomino notturno" or "Digitale purpurea," Mallarmé's "Le nénuphar blanc" and Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*, the determinant source would certainly seem to be the Homeric Hymn and its Ovidian rewriting. [4] Poems such as "I fiori,"

---

[3] The passage in which Persephone is abducted is as follows: "...playing and picking lovely flowers with our hands,/soft crocus mixed with irises and hyacinth,/rosebuds and lilies, a marvel to see, and the/narcissus that wide earth bore like a crocus./ As I joyously plucked it, the ground gaped from beneath,/ and the mighty lord, Host-to Many, rose from it/and carried me off beneath the earth in his golden chariot/much against my will..." *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Translation, Commentary and Interpretative Essays. Ed. by Helene P. Foley. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) 24.

[4] In *Flower Poetics in Nineteenth Century France*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) Philip Knight focuses on the use of flower rhetoric and imagery in Romantic and Symbolist poets. Barbara Seward in *The Symbolic Rose* (New York: Columbia University

"L'Anapo" and "Ninfee," and others are better understood in this context. In "L'Anapo" not only is the myth of Proserpina (Latin name of Persephone), evoked but also those of Aretusa and Cyane. "L'Anapo" draws upon the Homeric hymn as well as the Ovidian version. In Book V of the *Metamorphoses* (5.385-486), Ovid tells the story of Proserpina. He adds many elements absent in the Homeric hymn. [5] For example, the presence of the nymph Cyane, consort of Anapis, who tries to block Pluto and is consequently transformed into a spring by him. Aretusa also plays a part in the Ovidian version since it is she who informs Demeter where her daughter has been taken. In "L'Anapo" the poet remembers these myths as the boatman tears a papyrus from the river:

e quando il barcaiolo strappa
su dal piede carnoso
un papiro
(la chioma abbandonata sull'acque
s'imbeve e affonda
in un piccolo gorgo)
tu pensi alle candide membra
di qualche ninfa rapita
alla patria grotta.

Si sale alla sorgente –
Ciane azzurra che seppe
la sorte di Proserpina – ed un'altra
fonte è laggiù –
Aretusa dolce
al limite del salso mare –
in Ortigia che trascolora
come una grande
conchiglia.

"Disperazione" makes clear that the poet identifies with these "ninfe rapite" and uprooted flowers: "Io sono il fiore /di chissà qual tronco sepolto/[...] Io sono un fiore diaccio – /straniato /[...] O chi darà/al fiore,/

Press, 1960) studies the significance of the rose and other flowers in Ancient civilizations and in Dante, the rose of his Paradiso. She also explores rose symbols in Romantic and Contemporary poets (Yeats, Eliot).

[5] For a more comprehensive understanding of how Ovid transforms the Homeric Hymn see *The Metamorphosis of Persephone* by Stephen Hinds. (Cambridge University Press, 1987) 72.

alla sua corolla dolente/ la forza estrema di interrarsi?" As in the Homeric Hymn and its Ovidan rewriting, the condition of *straniamento* or estrangement, is visualized through the uprooted flower, the "fiore diaccio" "straniato."

The flowers of "Assenza" suggest silence and death since they seem to drown or dissolve in water. The "azalee" grow mute in water just as Ovid's Cyane was rendered mute when transformed into a spring: "Lenta vagò/sotto l'assorto cielo,/la barca vasta e pallida:/vedemmo/in rosso cerchio crescere alla riva/le azalee, cespi muti." When Demeter searched for Persephone, Cyane could not tell her what she knew: "Ea ni mutata fuisset,/omnia narrasset; sed et os et lingua volenti/dicere non aderant, nec quo loqueretur, habebat" (*Metamorphoses*, Book V, 465-7). An analogous process of floral dissolution through water also occurs in "I morti" through a more complicated synesthetic metaphor. The sound of the campanili, the bells, descend like flowers (corollas) to drink in the "cavo degli occhi" (the empty eye sockets) of "i morti" who turn their faces towards the "cancelli." "Poi, quando nel cavo degli occhi/corolle sperse di campane/scendono a bere,/lenti essi volgono il volto/ai cancelli." Such dissolution is also present in the poem entitled "Per Emilio Comici" where it is also charged with Ophelian nuances: "s'aprono lenti fiori di follia/sull'acqua dell'anima." The poem "Ninfee" also develops the image of the flower whose roots are lost in the depths of a dark lake. Again a dissolution and a permanent condition of exclusion are evoked as in the Proserpina/Cyane myth. But this poem's intertexts are multiple. The "nénuphar" also occurs in the poetry of Mallarmé ("Le nénuphar blanc") and Verlaine. But it is Verlaine in "Promenade Sentimentale" (*Poèmes Saturniens*, 1867) who associates the aquatic flower with a ghostly and moribund landscape: "...et l'épais linceul/Des ténèbres vint noyer les suprêmes/Rayons du couchant dans ses ondes blêmes/Et les nénuphars, parmi les roseaux,/Les grands nénuphars sur les calmes eaux." "Ninfee" also underlines Pozzi's iconographic mode of expressing alienation. Her description of the "acqua vederazzurra" calls forth Monet's green blue waters upon which the "nymphéas" float. [6] The text develops three distinct moments. In the first the "ninfee" resemble magical cushions left by a "fata:" "Ninfee pallide lievi/coricate sul lago – /guanciale che una fata/ risvegliata/ lasciò/ sull'acqua verdeazzurra –."

[6] Monet's painting, entitled "Le Bassin aux Nymphéas" was completed in 1899.

In the second moment, which coincides with the second stanza of the poem, the flowers are seen in a darker light. They are no longer beautiful objects "coricate sul lago," they have lost their roots in the depths of the lake: "ninfee – /con le radici lunghe/perdute/nella profondità che trascolora –." The poet's identification with the "ninfee" is made explicit in the thrid moment of the poem: "anch'io non ho radici/che leghino la mia/vita – alla terra – /anch'io cresco dal fondo/di un lago – colmo/di pianto."

The Proserpina /Cyane myth is also present in "I fiori" where Spring flowers have been blocked and transformed into an "inutile messe/prigioniera," trapped "in fondo al nero mare/cuore." But in "I fiori" these trapped inner flowers are contrasted to "real" external flowers which, however, do not provide any consolation since there is no one who could sell any on the "tristo cammino:" "O chi mi vende/un fiore – un altro fiore/nato fuori di me/in un vero giardino/che io possa donarlo a chi mi attende?/Non c'è nessuno,/non c'è nessuno che vende/i fiori/per questo tristo cammino?" In this poem the "fioraia" is marked by her absence. In other texts even when she is present she is also associated with alienation or futility as in "Sonno:" "Ma sola/al gelo notturno/tremerà/la fioraia presso il vano donarsi/della fontana." In "Errori" the "fioraie" hold the estranged flowers that suffer beneath the snow since they have been taken from the "paesi del sole:" "Fiocca la neve leggiadramente/sui cesti delle fioraie: imbianca/le giunchiglie e le viole,/le fresie magre, venute/dai paesi del sole./A guardarle si pensa/dei tanti destini errati/che dolgono."

The thematic as well as intertextual approach used in this study shows the clearly visual nature of Antonia Pozzi's poetry. Texts such as "Ninfee" evoke well-known paintings and the many references to color through different flowers confirm the iconographical (referential) dimension. What is specific to Pozzi is the presence of floral themes within a greater intertextual heritage, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and its Ovidian version in particular. Although Antonia Pozzi draws upon these classical myths and numerous literary traditions, she does succeed in blending them into a unique manner i.e., the use of floral metaphors which express alienation, self-dissolution and unfulfilled desire. [7] The

[7] This visual perspective is reinforced by Pozzi's parallel production, that is, her photography. See the selections in the 1989 Garzanti edition.

floral themes are rendered all the more intense in Pozzi's brief poems in which long and short lines typically alternate and in which flower images are almost always isolated at the end of lines:

> Ora si torce
> acre tra i rovi la tua voglia gracile
> della vita: e sei giglio
> improvviso sul bordo di una forra,
> quando fresca nel vento
> ti solleva
> la tua rossa brughiera.

We might ask if the consistent placement of floral images at the end of lines is a means of reinforcing the theme of dissolution. In spite of this attention to spatial arrangement, Pozzi's visual modes should be distinguished from other achievements which are also pictorial since they explore fully the possibilities of textual space. For example in certain pieces Campana (*Canti orfici*), Luzi (*Avvento notturno*) and Amelia Rosselli (*Variazioni belliche*) reject conventional (communicative) syntactical stuctures and signify through contrasting associations and metonymy. Nevertheless this does not mean, as the above example clearly indicates, that Pozzi did not use textual space. Indeed her characteristically visual mode along with the somber grace of her poems are among the most compelling reasons why *Parole* deserves to be considered one of the major works of the Novecento Canon.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

WORKS CITED

Baffoni-Licata, Laura, "La meteora esistenziale e poetica di Antonia Pozzi," *Italian Culture*, 1991. 355- 369.

Montale, Eugenio, "Parole di Antonia Pozzi," *Sulla poesia*. Milano: Mondadori, 1976. 49-53.

The Odyssey of Homer. Trans. by Allen Mandelbaum. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Selections from Ovid. Edited with Notes and Vocabulary by Charles William Dunmore. New York: David McKay Co. Inc, 1963. 70.

Pozzi, Antonia, *Parole*. A cura di Alessandra Cenni e Onorina Dino. Introduzione di Alessandra Cenni. Milano: Garzanti, 1989.

Verlaine, Paul. *Œuvres poétiques complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.