



December 2002

An Essay on the Instability of Symbols, along with Some Reflections on the Literary Use of Violets

Rodney Stenning Edgecombe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 38, no.4, December 2002, p. 345-366

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

An Essay on the Instability of Symbols, along with Some Reflections on the Literary Use of Violets

By RODNEY STENNING EDGECOMBE

WHEN DAPHNE TURNS into a laurel tree in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Apollo continues to love her, first attempting to embrace her new vegetative presence, and then, still rejected, constructing a set of memorial symbols in her honor. However, one senses a certain desperation in the poet's effort to connect what the laurel has come to signify over time with its immediate physical properties. Since the primary impulse behind the *Metamorphoses* is etiological, Ovid can't account for the acknowledged nexus between laurel and conquest in morphological terms. He gets round the problem, however, with a set of godly fiats. Deity, after all, is never accountable to anything but itself:

But even now in this new form Apollo loved her; placing his hand upon the trunk, he felt the heart fluttering beneath the bark. He embraced the branches as if human limbs, and pressed his lips upon the wood. But even the wood shrank from his kisses. And the god cried out to this: 'Since thou canst not be my bride, thou shalt at least be my tree. My hair, my lyre, my quiver shall always be entwined with thee, O laurel. With thee shall Roman generals wreath their heads, when shouts of joy shall acclaim their triumph, and long processions climb the Capitol. Thou at Augustus' portals shall stand a trusty guardian, and keep watch over the civic crown of oak leaves which hangs between. And as my head is ever young and my locks never shorn, so shalt thou keep the beauty of thy leaves perpetual.' Paean was done. The laurel waved her new-made branches, and seemed to move her head-like top in full consent. (1:43)

But while Ovid found himself flummoxed by the laurel-conquest-portal complex as far as appropriate symbolic vectors went, we can easily see why he made Apollo embellish his person, lyre and quiver with laurel leaves. They are mementoes; and since mementoes are a form of mnemonic metonymy (they have to be metonymic in order to be portable, as in the classic instance of hair in a locket), I don't think we need embrace Peter Sacks's reading of the passage and have him anguish over the inability of symbols to equate with the wholes they symbolize. After all, Ovid placed *living* laurels (as opposed to wreaths) on either side of Augustus's door, and actual trees did eventually flourish at that site, as one commentator on the *Metamorphoses* points out—"Die Thüre des Palastes des Augustus war mit einem Eichenkranze geschmückt; auf jener Seiter derselben stand ein Lorbeerbaum" (*Metamorphosen*, ed. Haupt and Müller 1:41)—even though another claims that wreaths were initially decreed: "Eines der decreta honorifica ... für Augustus vom Januar 27 hatte zum Inhalt dass ... die Türpfosten mit Lorbeer geschmückt werden sollten" (*Metamorphosen* ed. Bömer 1:75). In other words, emblematic metonymy yielded to the full presence of the tree, a devel-

opment either inspired by Ovid's own version of the decretum, or simply reported by him.

Which is not, of course, to deny that Apollo *does* also sever leaves from the tree, and that Ovid relays those symbols in the serial and abstract medium of language, requiring them to function in a serial and abstract way—in an abstractive way, indeed. For the whole point of symbolism is its capacity to displace and summarize events or ideas too large for immediate absorption, though the eventual absorption is entirely possible, and, indeed, usually occurs. Apollo's detached leaves don't preclude the complete picture of the nymph: they simply defer and mediate its arrival, and that mediation is embedded in the very processes of art, whether in a temporal art like poetry, or in a spatial one like sculpture, as witness Bernini's statue of Apollo and Daphne. A symbol utters a silent summons to silent presences, most of which enter the experience in the form of connotations and supplementary mental images. If Apollo had been Pan, he could have uprooted Daphne as unceremoniously as that satyr-god uprooted the reedy Syrinx, and carted her away. But since he is the god of art, not of instinct, he proceeds to work in terms of allusive compression. The heratio that strums on the pronoun "te" in "semper habebunt / te coma, te citharae, te nostrae, laure, pharetrae" (1:40) strikes me as a triumphantly repetitive affirmation of the fact that the laurel, transposed into altogether different contexts, will always summon up the memory of Daphne. Sacks, on the other hand, detects a note of desperation:

Even as he reiterates the desperate *te ... te ... te*, Apollo is having to *refer* to the nymph, or to the whole tree, by focusing on a detached part of that tree, the fragmentary sign alone which he can attach to his lyre, his quiver, or his hair, and which he already projects as a sign in the future absence of either nymph or tree. (4)

In my opinion, this turns the processes of memorial symbolism inside out, since Apollo, far from intending the laurel leaf to signify Daphne's absence, embraces it as a talisman of presence, a stimulus—metonymic and portable—for the mental recovery of her two discrete selves (human and vegetative), and of the metamorphosis itself.

Unlike Sacks, I have no sense of "either/or" here. The god clearly expects his memory to serve up the *complete* history of the transformation and to refresh his sense of Daphne's presence in all the laurel trees of Latium. Living on as a tree, she repeatedly yields leaves from her arboreal self (a self-enforcing, self-renewing symbolism). We know from Proust that an isolated sensuous experience can activate complete recollection, and that the imagination suffers no constraint or sense of fragmentation from its isolation (as Sacks seems to imply it does). The metonymic fragmentation of the part has the effect, indeed, of generalizing Daphne's presence, for each portable leaf attaches itself to emblems of Apollo's duty—diadem, instrument, weapon—in the discharge of which he thus honors and memorializes his love. His emblematic tribute piggybacks Daphne into republican and imperial rites, irrelevantly and by default—or so the silence about her etiological connection with those rites would imply.

But while Sacks turns the mnemonic function of symbols inside out, he does raise an issue altogether more central, viz., the extent to which symbols can be assigned either an arbitrary or an etiological (which is to say explicable) meaning. In the language of C. S. Peirce, “insofar as the Index is affected by the Object, it necessarily has some quality in common with the Object [and] ... does, therefore, involve a sort of Icon” (qtd White 105n). It is when that “quality” has been effaced that problems arise:

This second alteration, requiring an unnatural severing of the tree and an artificial entwining of its cut leaves, seems not only to suggest a move from organic nature to the item of an unnatural, societal code, but also to enforce and confirm that Apollo’s consoling sign can never enjoy a purely organic relation to the object that it signifies, or for which it substitutes. (Sacks 4-5)

Even so, I’m not sure that Sacks offers a wholly accurate explication of Ovid here. Never say “never.” After all, the poet *does* explain the laurel’s nondeciduous habit as an “immortality” shared with the god—“And as my head is ever young and my locks never shorn, so shalt thou keep the beauty of thy leaves perpetual.” Here the poet reaches home ground—etiology—and even if, like all modes of divine grace, the god’s gift is arbitrary, the continuity between the unchanging appearance of the tree and the unchanging nature of godhead involves an “organic relation to the object that it signifies.” However, Sacks is surely right in finding that the stylized metonymy of leaves detached and enwreathed implies “a move from organic nature to the item of an unnatural, societal code.” Some vegetation ritual, lost to time, has connected the laurel with conquest, and with the civic rites of the Latins, even if the symbol’s physical explicability has vanished in the process of transmission. The more distant the signifier from a recoverable signified, the greater our sense of an “unnatural” (and therefore an arbitrary) system of meanings. All that Ovid can offer by way of explication is the *de facto* decrees of deity. Perhaps one could set up a generic boundary here and argue that emblems (as opposed to archetypes) are symbols whose signification is maintained almost wholly by external consensus because the vehicle’s aptness to its tenor, represented by an organic, self-evident connection, has been eroded or erased.

The consensus in question need not be intelligent; it need only be wide. Indeed, public iconography is sometimes shaped by popular misprisions, the real content of the icon having been suppressed, and the icon itself refashioned into an *ad hoc* rebus for meanings it was never meant to bear. Certainly it was the “*profanum vulgus*” that made St. Agatha the patron saint of bell-ringers and bakers. Medieval iconographers, either through ineptitude or through being too elliptical, had failed to depict her breasts in the detail needed to present them as severed body parts (she was martyred by a double mastectomy). Peasants gazing at her image thought that she carried either a pair of bells or a pair of loaves on a platter and so assigned her these irrelevant spheres (pun intended) of patronage. A false gloss displaced the official one by force of numbers, and officialdom eventually surrendered to that popular misprison.

If, as the anthropologist Victor Turner has remarked, a “symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behav-

ior” (qtd Doty 81), the ritual must be current—current, but not necessarily comprehended. A symbol might indeed embody the “ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (qtd Doty 81), but “specific structures” can lose their rationale without losing their specificity. Thus when Ovid came to explain why a conqueror should wear a laurel wreath, careless transmission of the data, or the skewing of its cultural context confronted him with a *cul-de-sac*. The laurel vehicle no longer fitted its tenor as once it probably had. Hence his being at a loss as to how to reconstruct its nonerotic symbolic function, and hence his falling back on the arbitrary pronouncements of a god.

All of which goes to show that even official, public symbols all too easily go out of focus, so out of focus, indeed, as to call for the desperate remedy of reinvention. In many instances, the mystifying disconnection of the vehicle from its official tenor might lie less with a loss of context than with the willful reconstruction of the original symbol. Some poets have privatized and inverted the publicly acknowledged content of symbols, while others have cobbled up meanings in the *absence* of any consensual content. That is because, as we have seen, symbols can lose their official significance, and, reaching posterity like so many empty shells, invite the hermit crabs of improvisation to move in. Irwin Panofsky, for example, points out how in the late Middle Ages, “the image of the little pagan Cupid ... still lived in everybody’s memory, but, having lost its original significance, had come to be interpreted in [a] metaphorical or allegorical way” (98-99). All very well if you have three or four iconographic counters to work with (arrow, wings, boyhood), since some kind of meaning can be triangulated from them, even if it differs altogether from the intended one. But what do you do if the image reaches you naked, as it were—attached to an event but not in any physically persuasive way? If we return to Ovid’s impasse over Daphne, we could speculate that the ancient Latins might have made the laurel signify conquest simply because it was plentiful (and therefore dominant) or rare (and therefore prestigious). Or they might have chosen laurel wreaths in preference to a coronal of flowers because its simple leaves seemed more “manly.” All of which means that, in the absence of any inspectable or self-expounding link between tenor and vehicle, the connection must be summoned out of nowhere and then enforced—as it was enforced by ceremonious repetition. Roman civic ceremony, no less than medieval stained glass, was a “*biblia pauperum*” of sorts, creating visual codes and confirming them by perpetual reenactment.

Clearly, then, some sort of matrix is required to keep symbolic meanings steady and intact. When a population becomes literate, the stabilizing power of this matrix increases in proportion, and never more so than when its literacy centers centripetally on a shared primary text—say, the Roman Catholic liturgy and the Bible (at least where Western literature is concerned). At the same time, widespread literacy can bring with it a centrifugal urge toward individualism and the desire to refashion symbols against the grain of their official coding. The Bible has served to enforce an almost fixed and unnegotiable symbolic content of the lily and the rose, two important symbols in the Song

of Songs, but not before they themselves had been reinvented by the church as spiritual rather than erotic items. This rage for order notwithstanding, divergent significations spring up all over the place, as for instance the rose-crowned Cupid of trecento iconology, where, according to Panofksy, the flowers “originally had stood not for the ‘merit to be acquired by observing the commands of Sacred Love,’ as Barberino wrote, but for worldly pleasures” (120). The Bible might have guaranteed a degree of iconographic uniformity in the presentation of Judeo-Christian subjects, but it wouldn’t have exerted much influence on the humanist revival.

And even within the matrix of official Christian symbols there was room to maneuver. The exact format of the vehicle could vary in the absence of controlling data (sometimes, indeed, in defiance of those data), even if the tenor tended to remain stable. Still, once the vehicle admits more than is officially sanctioned, “Metz’s Law” will apply: “not everything is iconic in the icon, and there is the iconic outside the icon” (qtd White 84). Donatello’s diverse takes on John the Baptist attest to this iconic flexibility and the avenues it opens into different kinds of interpretation. For example, to present John the Baptist as being “older than Biblical history warrants” is to overlay (and even to efface) the ravages of asceticism with the ravages of time:

... seeing that Donatello, as a Florentine loyal to his patron saint, sculpted him many times, it will be more convenient to notice all these statues seriatim. (1) The one on the Campanile (1416) makes the saint a young peasant in lusty youth, with a heavy wooden face unilluminated by any touch of spirituality. (2) That of the Bargello is of a full-grown man, meagre and ascetic, and suggesting under the marble a conscious self, deeply spiritualized. (3) The charming little Relief in the same gallery shows him in childhood. (4) A youthful bust in the Palazzo Martelli (ascribed also to Antonio Rossellino), and (5) a statue also as a young man. (6) In S. Giovanni dei Fiorentini in Rome (a doubtful work), as a boy. (7) The Church of the Frari at Venice possesses a statue of him (1451), carved in wood and terribly overloaded with paint, in which he is represented as somewhat past maturity, and treated in a style which culminated in the shaggy ugliness of the Magdalen of the Florentine Baptistery. (8) The bronze statue at Siena (1458). (9) The bronze statue at Berlin. Both of these represent the Baptist older than Biblical history warrants. (Waters 67)

Such vagaries notwithstanding, however, the Bible is sufficiently clear about the function and vestment of John the Baptist for Donatello to have included codified hagiographic emblems in all his statues—an improvised, twiggy cross, a shaggy jerkin—that leave no doubt of his subject’s identity.

This symbolic code is far more stable in the case of John the Baptist than it is with other saints, however. For without the presence or absence of scriptural narrative that is largely (if not universally) accepted, local traditions often conflict with each other, and those who collate them don’t always take the trouble to harmonize the contradictions. Sometimes there are confusing areas of overlap. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, for example, tells us that the image of a “Hind (or Stag)” represents “Eustace; Giles; Hubert; and others” (349) and points out also that a dog can variously identify St. Vitus or St. Rock (359). And if we try to understand what Christianity intended by the fig, Gertrude Grace Sill’s *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art* tells us that it “represents

fertility as well as lust, because of its many seeds and the use of its leaves," but that it also figures "fruitfulness and good works" (55). Either a case of commendable versatility or self-cancelling confusion, but more probably the latter, for the same manual assures us that "the **white rose** is a symbol of purity, the gold or **yellow rose** a symbol of impossible perfection and papal benediction and the red rose a symbol of martyrdom" (52), while elsewhere it quotes Ambrose's *De Virginibus* as hymning "the red roses of chastity" (50). The muddle of unreconciled meanings is one thing, but at least it supplies a choice of handles. Sometimes, however, Christian iconography will amount to a knobless door, the visual attributes of a saint so generalized as to have no heuristic value at all. Anybody paging through a book of Renaissance paintings, for example, would be hard put to tell the episcopal saints apart without reference to the captions. Their office is clearly signaled by miter and crosier, but not their names.

Such enigmas center on a loss of historical context, but there is another, equally potent factor in the obfuscation of symbols. To be Aristotelian for the moment, a physical object possesses inspectable, external properties ("accidents") by which we access its "substance." Symbols are thus transubstantiates—conversions of any or all of those physical accidents into substances that supervene upon the common identity of the object. Depending on which of the "accidents" are valorized and which are suppressed, the "transubstantial" values of the image will differ considerably. Let's remember the aphorism that I have waggishly dubbed Metz's Law: "not everything is iconic in the icon, and there is the iconic outside the icon." This means that any one aspect of a flower can be isolated for emblematic framing but that the leftover "ground" outside that metonymic spotlight might itself yield emblematic material for a wholly *different* kind of appropriation. Any symbolic conversion begins in the eye of the beholder and to that extent remains a subjective reading, even when it receives the imprimatur of a powerful institution such as the church, and, with that, the sanction of its rubrics and formularies. The readings encoded in those rubrics and formularies, moreover, are themselves the product of many different eyes, however centralizing the documents that mediate them might try to be. Even while claiming absolute authority, Catholicism failed to institutionalize its symbols with the same immutable clarity that Linnaean nomenclature achieved for the natural sciences (and even there, to this day, we find a perpetual flurry round its taxonomic edges as plants get named and renamed and renamed again). The symbolic variants inside Catholicism might pale beside the huge regional variation in the pre-Linnaean names of plants, but they varied none the less.

To grasp the relativism of symbol-making, indeed, we have only to turn that variation of common plant names. Their profusion derives from a profusion of viewpoints, for, as we have seen, any one flower's accidents can be filtered, read, and symbolically processed in different ways. Only a system of nomenclature as fixed and consensually recognized as Linnaeus's could have regularized this multiplicity—and only the Bible, which Northrop Frye called the "great code," could, as a fixative of symbolic values, come near to match-

ing the stability of Linnaean binomials. As Frye observes, its “mythical structures continue to give shape to the metaphors and rhetoric of later types of structure” (35). Since symbolic values are no less relative than regional names, the apparently organic “embodiments” of values, or, to revive our Aristotelian framework, the accidents transubstantiated into symbol, produce a chaos of opposing claims. The violet’s demure posture on the one hand, and its heady scent on the other, produce a clash of readings even more unsusceptible of resolution than the Sillian “white rose of chastity” and the Ambrosian “red rose of chastity.” This is wholly to be expected, for flowers had evolved their (biologically purposive) forms and functions many millenia before the first hominids or their successors began to think in symbolic terms. In forging *any* symbols, protopoets had to proceed *ex post facto*, for even the most abstract and notional symbols can ultimately trace their origin to physical experience, even if that doesn’t guarantee semiotic consensus. Eric Gould reminds us that Jung’s archetypes, theoretically the least culture-bound of all symbols, “are available only as ‘effects’ of an unknown cause. They are prior ‘psychic phenomena’ which somehow reveal the nature of both the universal ‘soul’ and creativity at once” (19). Even a seemingly unnegotiable symbolic meaning such as the sun’s signification of life might therefore be differently inflected in times of drought, when indeed it might very well come to signify death. Oppositional takes on such basic and apparently unequivocal symbols no doubt underlay the Hindu decision to embrace paradox as the paradigm of human experience, and indeed of deity itself, as witness Shelley’s homage to Shiva in the “Ode to the West Wind”: “Destroyer and preserver; hear, O hear!” (616).

But it didn’t take long for religious systems committed to a linear scheme of things to read off the vast Rorschach blot of the natural world in terms of their own suppositions. Their purveyors came to argue that symbology centered on acts of discovery rather than on invention, and, fortified by a belief in deity, cherished the conviction that the same deity to whom they attributed “revelation” had also written into the natural world the symbols of its selfhood. The medieval mind attempted to unravel that putative code—and so did the Victorian, or at least that Tractarian part of it that tried to retrieve medieval postures of orthodoxy. Hence John Keble’s astonishing assumption (for 1822, that is) of a supplementary bible inscribed in the natural world (*The Christian Year* 51):

The works of God above, below
Within us and around,
Are pages in that book to show
How God Himself is found.

More astonishing still, since it is made in an encyclopedia, is this twentieth-century assumption that Holy Cross Mountain,

a famous scenic wonder[,] is situated in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado. By a vagary of nature or perhaps a supernatural purpose the eternal snows linger in the crevices of the mountain side to form this symbol of the Cross of Calvary in what might be said to be a perpetual pledge to mankind. (“Colorado” in *The Consolidated Encyclopaedia* 3)

Such anecdotal absurdities take us right back to the “AI” that, according to pagan myth, Apollo imprinted on the petals of the hyacinth. The encyclopedist might nod at Darwin with two perfunctory subjunctives, but he or she remains impenitently medieval in outlook. For behind most medieval “science,” and facilitating such symbolic extractions from, and insertions into, the contingencies of nature, was an inveterate apriorism compounded by faulty observation. Like the lineaments of Alec D’Urbeville, passingly redefined by piety, those of physical world were, throughout the centuries, “diverted from their hereditary connotation to signify impressions for which Nature did not intend them” (Hardy 335). Self-appointed readers imposed their symbols under cover of “deducing” them and all the while invested their efforts with specious authority. Because their position was entrenched by a universal weakness for *argumenta ad verecundiam* and, with that, a failure to verify even primary facts, they were able to refashion the natural world into a repository of Judeo-Christian moral counters. Bestiaries were one channel by which these counters were disseminated, though the Epistle of Barnabas suggests that apocryphal scripture also played its part:

[Moses said,] You shall not eat the hare. Why? So that, he said you may not become a boy-molester, or be made like these. For the hare grows a new anal opening each year, so that however many years he has lived, he has that many anuses. (qtd Boswell 137-38)

The assumption that a *deus artifex* with an allegorizing turn of mind had conceived the world as a hugely magnified emblem book, while it fostered this kind of symbolic redaction, seems to have had less impact on the herbals, if only because the herbal writers had their feet more firmly planted on the ground than those who compiled bestiaries. No doubt they were more concerned with the practical efficacy of the plants they inventoried and less interested in the symbology that, conditioned by that unrelenting medieval urge to allegorize, had cookie-cut the animal world into heraldic silhouettes—the animal world *and* the plant world, for, as Harold Jenkins points out in his note on a flower catalog in *Hamlet*, the Elizabethan systems of floral signification were also enshrined “in popular beliefs” and that a “difficulty for us is that much of it has not survived” (537). However, even the herbals were not wholly exempt. Such stable and consensual information as that concerning the properties of plants could also find itself conscripted into emblem, as this poem by George Herbert shows—“What is fairer then a rose? / What is sweeter? Yet it purgeth. / Purgings enmitie disclose, / Enmitie forbearance urgeth” (178). This medicinal symbolization of the rose, it goes without saying, is wholly eccentric, for its dignity as a symbol of love had long been fixed by the Song of Songs. So much so, indeed, that it too had to be tweaked and adjusted to function in other ways and with other tenors. Bernard of Clairvaux took pains to dephallicize the flower when he called the BVM a “*rosa sine spina*,” stripping “l’épine” in search of the epicene. Sex, after all, was a thorn in the sides of Christian ascetics from Paul onwards, and it is not surprising that, true to emblematic habit of labeling the pages of the *liber naturae*, a celi-

bate should, by pointing his *baculum indicans* first at the flower and then at its newly denuded stem, place a bowdlerized rose at the service of the church.

Establishing tenors by a systematic *deixis* and the fixing of labels applied not only to the *données* of the “*liber naturae*” but also to the emblematic odds and ends from which many “imprese” were fashioned, and which, even more than the allegorization of nature, needed a point-and-label procedure of explication to become intelligible. The conventions supporting this kind of didactic symbology, underpinned in turn by assumptions that the rise of empirical science was quick to dismantle, collapsed toward the end of the seventeenth century. At this point it yielded to a rather more plausible kind of coding, centered not in the crabbed rebuses that a *deus praeceptor* had supposedly scattered through the universe, but rather on the internal, psychological consonance of symbols and emotional states. Philosophers such as Archibald Alison rationalized the physical appropriateness of symbols to their tasks of signification, sidestepping anecdotal glosses of plant physiognomy, for example, and groping toward a more general system of affective archetypes. According to Walter Jackson Bate, Alison:

found analogies between colors and certain emotions, and, because these analogies apparently exist for the generality of mankind, he considered them natural rather than accidental. Since white is usually associated with day, its effect inclines to be one of ‘cheerfulness’; black, associated with night, produces a reaction not dissimilar to ‘gloom or melancholy’; while, blue as the color of the heavens in serene weather, ‘is expressive to us of somewhat the same pleasing and temperate Character.’ (151)

But of course these “natural” symbols are no less local (and culturally determined) than those from which Alison attempted to distinguish them:

An example of a merely ‘local’ analogy, however, would be purple, which ‘has acquired a character of Dignity from its accidental connection with the dress of Kings.’ Analogies may also exist between ‘certain affections of the mind’ and the mere degree or intensity of a color: ‘Soft or Strong, Mild or Bold, Gay or Gloomy ... are terms in all language applied to Colours ... and indicate their connection with particular qualities of Mind.’ (151-52)

One has only to recall that in the Bible white is the color of sepulchres, and that in the southern states of America “the blues” invokes a music of particularly cheerless and self-pitying kind to realize that psychologically based signification has no more continuity across time and space than that attached to external objects.

We have already examined the strange case of Agatha’s breasts and their accidental refiguration. Sometimes, however, responding to eccentric imaginative dictates, poets have made ad hoc, personal reconstructions of official symbols. William Blake constructed his by private fiat, giving birth to the many dictionaries and handbooks that, by cross-referring aspects of his mythology, try to get a fix on its otherwise inscrutable or wavering values. Not surprisingly, these often tread out a *circulus in probando*, having no verifiable text outside the larger text of Blake’s creating to reach any finality. Other writers again have *publicly* clothed institutional symbols with altered meanings, as when Francesco Barberino candidly declared his intention to re-read an

emblem by grafting new tenors on to old vehicles in his *Documenti d'amore*: "I describe Love in no other shape than did the learned men who dealt in demonstrating his effects in an image ... and those who will behold my image must not think that I am making it for a change, but to make it new through another interpretation" (qtd Panofsky 118).

"Demonstrating" is a keyword here, for, as I have pointed out, the procedures of the emblem book are nothing if not deictic, exercises in pointing and tagging designed to legitimate the symbolic equations it proposes. It proved a convenient procedure, indeed, for any enterprise of reinvention, as witness the way the parables of Jesus were often emblemized into allegorical shapes that were never intended. Biblical scholars point out that they underwent a seachange during the centuries of transmission that intervened between their delivery by Jesus and their setting down by the writers of the Gospels:

Moreover, as time went on, the conditions which had originally given rise to the parables frequently changed, and the Church being naturally unwilling to discard the known words of the Lord, found new applications for them which made sense in the changed circumstances. So by the time a parable reached the Evangelists its original bearing might have been entirely lost or it might have attracted to itself one or more later applications and meanings. It was thus natural that parables should come to be thought of as rather enigmatic and mysterious utterances. (Nineham 129)

Something comparable, though prompted by individual creative need, can be seen in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here Helena glosses the iconology of Amor as though she had an emblem book in hand. Arrows point and labels stick:

Things base and vile, holding no quantity,
Love can transpose to form and dignity.
Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;
Wings, and no eyes, figure unheedy haste:
And therefore is Love said to be a child,
Because in choice he is so oft beguil'd. (1.2.234-39)

The plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* involves many vertiginous transfers of devotion—all made by misprising eyes. But while it might be argued that a love centered in the mind will *not* value things base and vile, and that the sensual eye *will* (as it does in *The Merchant of Venice*), that is not the meaning that Shakespeare wishes to attach to the blinding of Cupid. So, flouting the interpretation that many Renaissance theorists had made of the unsighted god, he has the erotic blindfold signify a subjectivity that misapprehends the truth (as Titania misapprehends the appearance of Bottom). Many Neoplatonists disagreed:

That the supreme form of Neoplatonic love is blind was plainly asserted not only, as we have seen, by Marsilio Ficino, by Pico della Mirandola, by Lorenzo de' Medici, but the idea was expanded to inordinate lengths in the *Eroici fuori* by Giordano Bruno, who distinguished no less than nine kinds of amorous blindness. The ninth and highest of these is the sacred blindness pro-

duced by the immediate presence of the deity: 'wherefore the most profound and divine theologians say that God is better honoured and loved by silence than by words, and better seen by closing the eyes to images than by opening them: and therefore the negative theology of Pythagoras and Dionysius is so celebrated and placed above the demonstrative theology of Aristotle and the Scholastics.' (Wind 53)

Nothing could be further from Helena's glossing the blindfold as reckless subjectivity. The same goes for her equating wings as metaphors of "unheedy haste," for another sixteenth-century text, George of Montemayor's *Diana*, remarks that "They paint [Love] with wings, because ... the more perfect he is, with more swiftness and alienation of himselfe, he goeth to seeke the person of the beloved" (Two Gentlemen of Verona 51). At the same time, we need to remember that the wings of Cupid, while they might be made to accommodate these kinds of reading, had an altogether different origin in Orphic lore, which conceived him as being "double-sexed and golden-winged and, having four heads, sometimes roared like a bull or a lion, sometimes hissed like a serpent, or bleated like a lamb" (Graves 1.30). Out with "unheedy haste" and in with the "heady"! Such are the iconic shreds and patches from which quite other meanings have been tailored, and such is the fluidity—endless reconstruction and resignification and what Panofsky has called "pseudomorphosis"—that derives from a confluence of different value systems upon the same iconic vector.

This iconic instability is a function, in part, of the imperfect retrieval of humanist materials during the Renaissance. William Doty has observed the importance of the "functional vitality" of the originating myth when it comes to stabilizing the terms of its representation:

It is extremely important, therefore, to recognize the relative level of functional vitality of a particular myth at a particular time; ... At one moment the same mythological material may be 'heard' quite differently even by coequal members of the same society. Any number of instances could be cited of a graphic artist's figuring of a mythological scene with images that have been modified or rejected by contemporaneous literary artists: I think especially of Greek pottery illustrations but also of the development of paintings of the nativity of the Christ. (37)

While the matricial text is still fluid, or while it is the process of decaying and losing its stability, the consensus necessary for a public code of symbols will be impossible to reach. Notice how, for example, Shakespeare's Helena defers to pictorial representations of Cupid as having an implicit priority to, and primacy over, any verbal effort of symbol-making. Just as stained glass and statutory helped codify Christian iconology in the Middle Ages, so too did the emblem books that succeeded them. Nor is Helena alone in showing this writerly deference to plastic codes, for, centuries before her, Propertius in *Elegies* 2.13 had also taken bearings from pictorial presentations of Amor, public vectors of religious belief on display in places of worship and further codified by such compendia as Apollodorus' *Peri Theon*. One of the commentators on the lyric in question thus informs us that there "is no need to presume P. had an actual picture in mind, let alone before him; the iconography of Amor was familiar to everyone" (Richardson 245):

Quicumque ille fuit, puerum qui pinxit Amorem,
 nonne putas miras hunc habuisse manus?
 is primum uidit sine sensu uiuere amantes
 et levibus curis magna perire bona.
 idem non frustra uentosas addidit alas,
 fecit et humano corde uolare deum:
 (Richardson 65)

[Whoever he was who painted Love as a child
 Don't you think he had marvellous hands?
 First he saw that lovers live senselessly
 And that light passions lose great goods.

Nor was he mistaken in adding flighty wings
 And making him a God who flies from human
 / hearts.

(Lee 39)

Propertius was writing when such images were hot off the palette, and the informing values easily “read off” from the pictorial data in circulation.

But during the Renaissance, when these symbols had only recently been excavated or retrieved, contradictory lines of interpretation were reconciled with difficulty. For if Mircea Eliade is correct to claim that

The man of the societies in which myth is a living thing lives a World that, though ‘in cipher’ and mysterious, is ‘open.’ The World ‘speaks’ to man, and to understand its language he needs only to know the myths and decipher the symbols. (141)

it will follow that the decipherment will be considerably complicated if the myth has been exhumed only as an archaeological resource and made the subject of factional readings. No cultural consensus is possible in these circumstances. In the *Dialogue upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals* (the very title, with its appeal to utility, suggests a valiant effort to bring archaeological marginalia into the mainstream of Augustan culture), Addison, by giving short shrift to received symbolic values, shows himself to be a Bultmann *avant la lettre*, as eager to demythologize as medieval bestiarists were to fancy. Whereas Ovid wouldn't have questioned the etiology of the Nemean parsley wreath, the Augustan brusquely sweeps it out of the way—“I will not here trouble you with a dull story of Hercules' eating a salad of parsley for his refreshment, after his encounter with the Nemean lion” (1:329)—and adduces an entirely practical explanation: “One reason why they chose parsley for a garland, was doubtless because it always preserves its verdure, as Horace opposes it to the short-lived lily” (1:330). Like Addison before him, Thomas Hood shows an altogether more rational sense of the priority of nature to nurture, realizing that any coincidence between them is a matter of chance. In the “Ode to Rae Wilson, Esq” the forget-me-not can signify remembrance only to passing Englishmen, for while a wayside cross in Belgium might have a memorial function with regard to most passersby (“PRIEZ POUR LES MALHEUREUX”), the French word for the flower is “myosotis” and not “n'oubliez pas”:

If hard by the wayside I found a cross,
That made me breathe a pray'r upon the spot—
While Nature of herself, as if to trace
The emblem's use, had trail'd around its base
The blue significant Forget-Me-Not? (514)

The symbolic compulsion of the cross is strong enough to produce a reflex action in the poet, but he is more impressed by nature's apparent collusion with the symbolic codes that humankind has forced upon it. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, after all, a monolith so far loses its meaning as to signify only the memorial act itself: "where a stone pillar stands desolate and silent, to mark the site of a miracle, or murder, or both" (325). Even though Hood's vision is not so bleak as to render commutable such opposites as miracles and murders, he, like the speaker of Frost's "Design," invokes a simile of conjecture in lieu of an emblematic assertion: "If design govern in a thing so small" (194). More memorably progressive than both these tentative symbolic filiations, however, is Rossetti's refusal to attach any significance at all to the woodspurge. It is itself:

From perfect grief there need not be
Wisdom or even memory:
One thing then learnt remains with me,—
The woodspurge has a cup of three. (138)

While this unsymbolized haecceity derives from the blankness of grief, it also represents an impressive refusal to impose meanings. One would imagine that a Keble or a Faber never saw woodspurge without feeling the impulse to link up with the Trinity.

So much then, for the general problem of symbolic instability. Let me turn now to a secondary enterprise in this essay. If, even with a "universal" matrix of reference in hand, the meaning of biblical symbols can veer all over the place, the problem will be compounded, almost to the point of incoherence, if the symbol in question has no provenance in scripture or corresponding code. To show this, I shall survey some of the signifieds that have been attached to the violet. Although well-known and widely invoked, this flower has had to forgo the privileges of perspicuity and stability that, give or take a slippage or two, the rose and the lily have enjoyed through much of their literary history. The result has been a range of meanings (often diametrically opposed), for even when the tenor has been "organically" derived from the vehicle, a consensus of meaning hasn't necessarily been achieved. Regional shifts in violet nomenclature seem restrained in comparison with those of other species, but, even so, the various names bestowed upon it reveal a very diverse series of "takes"—"blue mice," "cuckoo's shoe," "cuckoo's stockings," "hypocrites," and "shoes and stockings" (Grigson 79)—none of which, interestingly enough, has affected its symbolic construction. Given its humble, head-averting habit, to connect the violet to ceremonies of triumph seems at first blush to be an odd thing to do. The libretto for Donizetti's *Rosmunda d'Inghilterra* has its chorus scatter violets in the path of a king. Since we have it on E. M. Forster's authority that Italian violets grow in profusion, we could no doubt "do an Addison" and find a practical reason (abundance) for this violaceous confetti:

Accoriamo: egli è che giunge ...
 Il re nostro ... Viva il re
 Giù pe' clivi, per le aiole,
 Pei giardin, pei prati aperti
 Si cogliam, spargiam viole,
 Ne tessiam ghirlande, e serti ...
 Ne spargiamo a mani piene
 Il sentiero al regio piè.
 (*Tutti i libretti di Donizetti* 726)

[Let us hasten: it is he who is coming ...
 Our King ... Long live the King!
 Down upon the slopes, where the flowers grow
 In the gardens and the open fields,
 Yes, let us gather and strew violets,
 Let us weave them into garlands and wreaths ...
 Let us scatter them by the handful
 Upon the path at the King's feet.]

The triumphalism of the Christian heaven, often depicted as being within gloating view of the “other place,” might also lie behind Giovanni di Paolo’s decision to include huge violets (almost big as the St. Joseph lilies that flank them) amid the grass of paradise (Chastel 201)—an iconological precedent for the violets cast before Enrico in *Rosamunda d’Inghilterra*. However, the librettist might also have been inspired by the triumphal Phallophori of ancient Athens, for, as F. M. Cornford notes, “Athenaeus quotes textually from Semos’ book *On Paeans*.... ‘The Phallophori ... wear no mask, but they put on a visor made of the flowers *serpyllum* and *paideros*, and above it they wear a thick wreath of violets and ivy[.]’” (42)—which thick wreaths, as in the case of Enrico’s public triumph, give the flower an assertive presence it might otherwise be thought to lack. And certainly the Duchess of York in *Richard II* 5.2.46, applies it to the arriviste favourites at court (“Who are the violets now / That strew the green lap of the new-come spring?”), while her husband caps the metaphor with a reference to “justs and triumphs” (5.2.52). Taken together, they anticipate the otherwise unexpected coupling in Romani’s text for Donizetti.

An Elizabethan discourse on floral emblems, H. Goldingham’s *Garden Plot* (1578) extrapolated from the arbitrary symbolization of blue to make violets signify faithfulness (“for that blue is the cognisance of truth, and wherein it hath as it were an eye, it betokeneth singular truth without hypocrisy”—qtd Donne 368), but it also latched on to a fairly widespread association of violets with humility because of their characteristic growth habit (“it groweth low near the ground and commonly under covert of other herbs and flowers”—qtd Donne 368). This is certainly one of the meanings imposed upon the flower in Adriano Morselli’s libretto for *Il Pirro e Demetrio* (1694), an opera by Alessandro Scarlatti. There they rebuke Mario’s aspiring to a love beyond his reach, not by their droop-headed posture (which isn’t mentioned), but by their “covert of other herbs”: “Voi vi state vergognese, mezzo ascose fra le foglie”

[You hang your heads, half concealed by the leaves] (*Contralto Songs* 2:163). Goethe compounded this connection of violet with humility in “Das Veilchen,” and, on this occasion, did indeed capitalize upon its *Insgebücktheit*:

Ein Veilchen auf der Wiese stand,
Gebückt in sich und unbekannt.

[A violet stood in the meadow,
modestly retiring and obscure.] (2:15)

This violet, however, aspires in a way that Merselli’s don’t, and even cherishes a Faustian yearning to rival lilies and roses for the privilege of being gathered by a shepherdess: “wär ich nur / Die schönste Blume der Natur” [if only I were Nature’s loveliest flower] (2:16). No such “non serviam” sentiments, however, when violets fall into Tractarian hands. “Sunday Nosegays,” a poem in Keble’s *Lyra Innocentium*, constructs an altogether different parable about them. The bosom of Goethe’s shepherdess is displaced by the more encompassing one of Abraham:

Ye to the Heaven-taught soul present
A token and a sacrament,
How to the highest room
Earth’s lowliest flowers our Lord receives:
Close to His heart a place He gives,
Where they shall ever bloom. (105-106)

Keble’s huge readership would have gone some way toward fixing this violet/humility nexus, and it no doubt received additional reinforcement from the Victorian “language of flowers,” a synthetic code of signifieds that, as Judith Walsh has pointed out, “was promoted by scores of small books that were intended as gifts for women and in which were detailed the specific meanings given to common flowers” (Walsh 1). One such book was *Collier’s Cyclopedia of Commercial and Social Information* (1882), which confidently assures us that “Flowers have a language of their own, and it is this bright particular language that we would teach our readers” (Robinson 1). But of course there *is* no intrinsic floral language (beyond the semaphore and runway markings that guide the pollinators to crucial caches of DNA), nor even a recognizable extrinsic one.

We have seen how a violet offered to a king, or a shepherdess, or a deity acquires a different intonation from each symbolic context. What is more, the synthetic code that the “floral linguists” strove to propagate between 1835 and 1880 was never fully authoritative or absolute, even despite its having the matricial stability of a “lexicon.” This is because several authors produced different glossaries, their tables of equivalence prompted now and then by an aspect of the flower’s physique, but otherwise largely arbitrary. It is hard, for example, to see why “Victorian authors ... variously identified holly with domestic happiness and foresight” (Walsh 2)—nothing about the leaves or the berries supports the coupling. While Ovid tried to make (specious) connections

to bridge the etiological gaps, floral linguists simply proceeded by assertion, even when their assertions shouted each other down. The various botanical morphings of the violet led to a range of significations, as witness this table (Robinson 1):

Violet, Blue Faithfulness
 Violet, Dane Watchfulness
 Violet, Sweet Modesty
 Violet, Yellow Rural happiness

Nowhere, however, does the “language of flowers” associate the violet with erotic appetite, an appetite that gave the flower its primary symbolic charge in the ancient world and prompted its association with the Phallophorae.

Grigson speculates that its heady scent might have been the trigger for this line of symbolic connection, which, oddly enough, seems to have extended forward into the Middle Ages, or at least (as a recovered classical significance) to have overlaid and mingled with medieval values in the early sixteenth century:

Scent suggested sex, so the violet was a flower of Aphrodite and also of her son Priapus, the deity of gardens and generation. Priapeion was one of the Greek names for the Violet. All this was well understood by the designer of the seventh and final tapestry of the Hunt of the Unicorn, which was woven probably for the marriage of Francis of France in 1514. In this last exquisite scene . . . , the captured unicorn lies within a fence, tethered, as a symbol of consummation, to the pomegranate tree of fertility. Round the white unicorn grow various plants of sex: Bistort, Lords-and-Ladies, Early Purple Orchis, Bluebells—and *Viola odorata*. (78)

I would argue that the violet in Donne’s “Ecstasy” owes as much to this tradition of erotic satiety as it does to the values that the Penguin editor derives from Goldingham: the lyric in question is nothing if not a fusion of sexual appetite with Neoplatonic doctrine: “Where, like a pillow on a bed, / A pregnant bank swelled up, to rest / The violet’s reclining head” (53). It would seem that in the Middle East, the erotic implication attached to the violet prevailed above all others, for there isn’t a whiff of Plato in the following lines from Hafiz:

Drift, like the wind across a violet bed,
 Before thy many lovers weeping low,
 And clad like violets in blue robes of woe,
 Who feel thy wind-blown hair and bow the head. (101)

We do, however, witness an allotrope of the triumph/violet connection, refracted through Hafiz’s sense of the flower’s self-immolation at the foot of the beloved, anticipating, and perhaps even inspiring (in the light of the *Westöstlichen Divan*), the fate of Goethe’s violet beneath the feet of the shepherdess:

Returns again to the pleasaunce the rose, alive from the
 / dead;
 Before her feet in obeisance is bowed the violet’s head.
 (105)

Mary Russell Mitford's violets straddle the Victorian chastity of Keble's and the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern sensuousness of Forster's and Hafiz's. The "Violeting" episode from *Our Village* bears this out:

Now a few yards farther, and I reach the bank. Ah! I smell them already—their exquisite perfume steams and lingers in this moist heavy air.... They never came on me before in such a sudden and luxuriant glory of simple beauty—and I do really owe one pure and genuine pleasure to feverish London! How beautifully they are placed, too, on this sloping bank, with the palm branches waving over them, full of early bees, and mixing their honeyed scent with the more delicate violet odour! ... Oh, that my whole life could pass so, floating on blissful and innocent sensation, enjoying in peace and gratitude the common blessings of Nature, thankful above all for the simple habits, the healthful temperament, which render them so dear! (48)

Because, according to the OED, "palm" extended to any nontropical tree from which material was gathered for Palm Sunday festivities, we can be fairly sure that Mitford was describing branches of *Salix caprea*. Even so, she has probably introduced the word for the sake of its botanical ambiguity and allowed the voluptuousness of the violet bank momentarily to transform an echt English landscape into an oriental pleasance. She insists, however, on the chaste humility of the flowers even in the midst of her sensuous revelling: "But I can at least snatch and prolong the fleeting pleasure, can fill my basket with pure flowers, and my heart with pure thoughts; can gladden my little home with their sweetness" (48).

In E. M. Forster's *Room with a View*, the erotic color of the violet image once again comes to the fore, as one might expect it to after such "pretty pieces of paganism" as his "Curate and the Faun" in *The Celestial Omnibus* collection. Kebelian violets, so to speak, are a function of curacy, Italian ones of faunhood:

George had turned at the sound of her arrival. For a moment he contemplated her, as one who had fallen out of heaven. He saw radiant joy on her face, he saw the flowers beat against her dress in blue waves. The bushes above them closed. He stepped quickly forward and kissed her. (75)

Violet banks like these play an important role in many erotic encounters, as witness that in Donne's "Ecstasy" and Oberon's in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though there, as we shall observe apropos of another flower catalogue, the semiotic value of individual flowers is to some extent lost and fused into the whole assembly: "I know a bank where the wild thyme blows / Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows" (2.2.249-50). Given the heady, soporific odors of this bank, Oberon's violet itself seems to be on the verge of sleep, proof of the ad hoc, improvisational nature of symbol-crafting.

Since violets often subtend carnal knowledge of one kind or another, one is hardly surprised to find John Keble (as like a curate and as unlike a faun as it is possible for a poet to be) feeling oppressed by the pulsing fecundity of "natura naturans" in "The Third Sunday after Easter" (*The Christian Year* 104):

Well may I guess and feel
 Why Autumn should be sad;
 But vernal airs should sorrow heal,
 Spring should be gay and glad:
 Yet as along this violet bank I rove,
 The languid sweetness seems to choke my breath,
 I sit me down beside the hazel grove,
 And sigh, and half could wish my weariness were death.

But then, of course, that “pale Galilean” languor is not irrelevant to yet another emblematic application of the violet (most versatile of flowers). For not only was it associated with the procreative rituals of the Phallophorae, but it also figured in connection with the funeral bier. Perhaps the purple variety has something to do with this funereal function, and perhaps, too, the fact that in Sonnet 12, Shakespeare centers the “carpe florem” topos on a violet: “When I beheld the violet past prime” (8).

Hamlet confirms the connection between violets, transience, and death when, in Act I, Laertes accuses the prince of dallying with Ophelia. He invokes violets as emblems of instability (“A violet in the youth of primy nature, / Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting”—1.3.7-8) and yet, in Act V, himself casts the violets of fidelity (ex Persius) in the teeth of the priest who questions Ophelia’s right to a Christian burial. On this occasion they signify her resurrection into a state of bliss—“And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring” (5.1.232-33)—an idea that Gray enlarged and orchestrated in a stanza deleted from his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”:

There scatter’d oft, the earliest of the Year.
 By Hands unseen, are show’rs of Violets found;
 The Red-breast loves to build and warble there,
 And little Footsteps lightly print the Ground. (138n)

This might also owe something to the fact that, in the deranged Ophelia’s vision of things, violets wither to acknowledge Polonius’s death, their humble growth habit here suiting them to the concerns of the “ars moriendi”: “I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died. They say a made a good end” (4.5.181-83).

That same humility of violets no doubt underlay their imagic eclipse in the neoclassical period, but, after the Romantic Revolution, they certainly joined the marigold and other common flowers recuperated by the fiat of Apollo in “I stood tip-toe” (Keats 2):

For great Apollo bids
 That in these days your praises should be sung
 On many harps, which he has lately strung;

No doubt conditioned by its Shakespearian coupling with transience, the Romantics tended to “read” the violet in just this way. Although the word “forlorn” triggers Keats’s return to the sphere of death and suffering in the “Ode to a Nightingale,” the idea of mortality in the apparently immortal sphere of the nightingale has already been anticipated by the violets: “Fast

fading violets cover'd up in leaves" (184). Merselli's violets were half concealed by their foliage whereas Keats's are supplied with a proleptic winding sheet. In *Marmion* too, Scott has Fitz-Eustace's song recapitulate the emblematic nexus of transience, faithfulness, and death with which *Hamlet* had invested the violet:

Where shall the lover rest,
Whom the fates sever
From his true maiden's breast,
Parted for ever?
Where, through groves deep and high,
Sounds the far billow,
Where early violets die,
Under the willow. (100-101)

The hint of the willow song from *Othello* 4.3 imparts a sense of premature death to violets that might otherwise have been read simply as harbingers of spring.

Sometimes, however, like any other flower introduced into a literary context, the violet need not signify anything beyond its own "florality." Shelley's lyric "On a Faded Violet" invests it only with a mute capacity of acceptance, a purpose that any other faded bloom could just as aptly have illustrated:

A shrivelled, lifeless, vacant form,
It lies on my abandoned breast,
And mocks the heart which yet is warm
With cold and silent rest.

I weep,—my tears revive it not!
I sigh,—it breathes no more on me;
Its mute and uncomplaining lot
Is such as mine should be. (592)

Here the violet is only a semblance of itself, an abstract pentimento that gives next to no sense either of its color or its form. All *specific* symbolic properties of the flower have likewise been nullified in "Nature's Way" by William Watson:

Nature! whose lapidary seas
Labour a pebble without ease,
Till they unto perfection bring
That miracle of polishing;
Who never negligently yet
Fashioned an April violet, (61)

However, even though, like Shelley's, Watson's violet vectors abstract properties shared by many other flowers besides, his argument (a Blakean one involving worlds and grains of sand) revolves in part upon the flower's humbleness, and to that extent half relies on one of its traditional significations. In much the same way, the violet in the flower procession from "Lycidas," for all the radiant conspicuity conferred by its trimeter chiave ("And glowing Violet"—124), signifies nothing beyond its own floral selfhood, whereas the

spring flowers, taken collectively, constitute a standard conceit of pastoral hyperbole—nature in mourning. In much the same way, Shelley chose violets as signatures of passingness without in any way wanting to make them specific emblems of mortality: “Odours, when sweet violets sicken, / Live within the sense they quicken” (678). As in “Ode to a Nightingale,” their penetrating fragrance enlivens our sense of them even as they fade. The poem centers chiefly on the “carpe florem” topos and on the recovery of past pleasures through memory. Again, any other sweetly scented flower would have met the bill.

Mircea Eliade has pointed out how, once the world has been mapped into a code of symbolic values, it produces an illusion of purpose and self-revelation:

The World is no longer an opaque mass of objects arbitrarily thrown together, it is a living Cosmos, articulated and meaningful. In the last analysis, *the World reveals itself as language*. It speaks to man through its own mode of being, through its structures and its rhythms. (141)

August von Schlegel had come to much the same conclusion more than a century before, noting how the hungry, idealizing mind devours its external context and spits it out again, chewed into a semblance of its own exorbitant rage for order:

modern art and thought are aware of an “internal discord,” an attempt to reconcile it by “hallowing the impressions of the sense, as it were, through a mysterious connection with higher feelings; while the soul, on the other hand, embodies its forbodings, or indescribable intuitions of infinity, in types and symbols borrowed from the visible world.” (qtd Bate 180)

“Borrowing” is an important word in the context of natural semiosis, implying as it does a temporary and provisional arrangement of materials likely to be reclaimed by the oblivion from which they emerge, meteor-like, with tails of momentary signification behind them. When many borrowings occur over a period of time, with no register (the Bible, say, or Roman civic ceremony) to keep track of what has been appropriated and for what purposes, contradictions are likely to abound. This much has been apparent from our brief conspectus of violet-related “meanings.” Let’s give Keble the last word since he has figured so prominently in our record of the flower’s symbolic vagaries. In “Fire,” a poem from *Lyra Innocentium*, he characterizes violets by an oxymoron:

Where violets by the reedy pool
Peep out so shyly gay: (92)

That neatly summarizes the contradictions of the flower’s symbolic functions, functions that spring from the rival systems of signification into which it has been conscripted over time.

Works Cited

- ADDISON, JOSEPH. *Dialogue upon the Usefulness of Ancient Medals Especially in Relation to the Latin and Greek Poets*. In *The Works of Joseph Addison*. Edited by Henry G. Bohn. 6 vols. London: George Bell, 1903.
- ATTWATER, DONALD. *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- BATE, WALTER JACKSON. *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England*. 1946, Reprint, New York: Harper, 1961.
- BOSWELL, JOHN. *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- CHASTEL, ANDRÉ. *The Studios and Styles of the Renaissance: Italy, 1460-1500*. Translated by Jonathan Griffin. London: Thames and Hudson, 1966.
- "Colorado" in *The Consolidated Encyclopaedia*. London: Consolidated World Research Society, 1944.
- Contralto Songs*. 2 vols. London: Boosey, 1912.
- CORNFORD, F. M. *The Origins of Attic Comedy*. London: Edward Arnold, 1914.
- DONNE, JOHN. *The Complete English Poems*. Edited by A. J. Smith. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- DOTY, WILLIAM. *Mythography: The Study of Myths and Rituals*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 1986.
- ELIADE, MIRCEA. *Myth and Reality*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964.
- FORSTER, E. M. *A Room with a View*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.
- FROST, ROBERT. *Selected Poems*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.
- FRYE, NORTHROP. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982.
- GOETHE, JOHANN WOLFGANG. *Goethes Sämtliche Werke*. 45 vols. Munich: Georg Müller Verlag, nd.
- GOULD, ERIC. *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1981.
- GRAVES, ROBERT. *The Greek Myths*. 2 vols. 1955; Reprinted and Revised. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960.
- GRAY, THOMAS, WILLIAM COLLINS, and OLIVER GOLDSMITH. *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*. Edited by Roger Lonsdale. London: Longman, 1969.
- GRIGSON, GEOFFREY. *The Englishman's Flora: Illustrated with Wood-cuts from Sixteenth-Century Herbals*. 1958, Reprint, London: Paladin, 1975.
- HAFIZ. *Fifty poems of Hafiz*. Edited by Arthur J Arberry. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962.
- HARDY, THOMAS. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. London: Pan Books, 1978.
- HERBERT, GEORGE. *The Complete Poems of George Herbert*. Edited by F. E Hutchinson. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1941.
- HOOD, THOMAS. *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*. Edited by Walter Jerrold. London: Oxford UP, 1906.
- KEATS, JOHN and PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY. *Complete Poetical Works with the Explanatory Notes of Shelley's Poems by Mrs. Shelley*. New York: Random House, nd.
- KEBLE, JOHN. *The Christian Year*. London: Oxford UP, nd.

- . *Lyra Innocentium: Thoughts in Verse on Christian Children, Their Ways and their Privileges*. London: Parker, nd.
- MITTFORD, MARY RUSSELL. *Our Village*. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1936.
- NINEHAM, D. E. *The Gospel of Saint Mark*. 1963, Reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- OVID. *Metamorphoses*. Translated by Frank Justus Miller. 2 vols. London: William Heinemann, 1916.
- . *Die Metamorphosen des P. Ovidius Naso*. Edited by Moriz Haupt and H. J. Müller. 2 vols. Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1885.
- . *Metamorphosen*. Edited by Franz Bömer. 7 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1969.
- PANOFSKY, IRWIN. *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, 1939; Reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1972.
- PROPERTIUS. *Elegies I-IV*. Edited and introduced by L. Richardson Jr. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1977.
- . *The Poems*. Translated by Guy Lee. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- ROBINSON, NUGENT, ed. *Collier's Cyclopedic of Commercial and Social Information and Treasury of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*. P. F. Collier, 1882. <http://www.apocalypse.org>.
- ROSSETTI, DANTE GABRIEL. *Poems & Translations 1850-1870 Together with the Prose Story 'Hand and Soul.'* London: Oxford UP, 1913.
- SACKS, PETER. *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985.
- SARACINO, EGIDIO, ed. *Tutti i libretti di Donizetti*. Milan: Garzanti, 1993.
- SCOTT, WALTER. *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart. Complete in One Volume with All His Introductions, Notes, Various Readings, and Notes by J. G. Lockhart, Esq.* Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1882.
- SHAKESPEARE, WILLIAM. *Hamlet*. Edited by Harold Jenkins. London: Methuen, 1982.
- . *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Edited by Harold F. Brooks. London: Methuen, 1979.
- . *The Sonnets*. Edited by John Dover Wilson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966.
- . *King Richard II*. Edited by Peter Ure. London: Methuen, 1961.
- . *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Edited by Clifford Leech. London: Methuen, 1969.
- SILL, GERTRUDE GRACE. *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*. New York: Collier Books, 1975.
- WALSH, JUDITH. "The Language of Flowers and Other Floral Symbolism Used by Winslow Homer." (*Antiques*, November 1999). <http://www.findarticles.com>.
- WATERS, W. G. *Italian Sculptors*. 1911; Reprint (rev. ed.), London: Methuen, 1926.
- WATSON, WILLIAM. *The Poems of Sir William Watson 1878-1935*. London: George G. Harrap, 1936.
- WHITE, JOHN J. "On Semiotic Interplay: Forms of Creative Interaction between Iconicity and Indexicality in Twentieth-Century Literature." In *Form Miming Meaning: Iconicity in Language and Literature*. Edited by Nänny, Max, and Olga Fischer. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999.
- WIND, EDGAR. *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 1958; Reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.