

Belated Flowers

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 23 Jul 1999

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Alice Turner — 23 Jul 1999, 09:21

This is another post I sent 3 days ago in response to Roy. I just realized this morning that it didn't go through., so here it is again.

I've dug around and found an old book, a reprint of a Victorian "Language of Flowers," by "Mrs. L. Burke" to see if I can add anything to Roy's fascinating analysis.

From: "Roy C. Lackey" <rclackey at stic.net>

1) When Dorcas, Agia, and Sev are being rowed across the Lake of Birds (I, XXIV) by Hildegrin, Dorcas plucks a blue water hyacinth from the surface of the lake--a place where flowers do not exist--and places it in her hair. The water hyacinth is most often associated with "constancy". The chapter title "The Flower of Dissolution" refers, of course, to the avern he is there to pluck. The water hyacinth is mentioned in the first line of the chapter; the avern in the last. The avern represents the dissolution of death, obviously, and is presented in contrast to the water hyacinth. While Sev is speculating about where the hyacinth came from his thoughts turn religious, noting the contrast of life and death, light and dark, order and chaos, etc., concluding, to state it simply, that the negative halves of these pairs of opposites is where God isn't.

Mrs. Burke was obviously English, and the water hyacinth is a native American plant, so she doesn't mention it. The water lily, however, stands for "purity of heart," which also pertains to Dorcas. The hyacinth itself, a quite different plant, is "sport, game, play."

I am aware of the use of the hyacinth in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" as a symbol of resurrection, which would fit perfectly in this context, and Wolfe well may have had this poem in mind when he wrote this scene, but in the sources on florigraphy that I have seen, resurrection is not the meaning assigned to the hyacinth. While the language of flowers and the symbolic use of flowers certainly overlap, they are not entirely congruent, and I make no pretense of being an authority on the subject.

2) On the day after the contest at the Sanguinary Field, after Sev's visit with Agia and Agilus in the latter's cell, Sev arranges for temporary quarters for the night for himself and Dorcas. The couple then goes for a walk. (I, XXX) "Dorcas had found a daisy for her hair; but as we walked about outside the walls ... it folded its petals in sleep, and she plucked instead one of those white, trumpet-shaped blossoms that are called moonflowers.". They soon return to their room to make love for the first time. It is unclear from the text where Dorcas obtained the daisy (yes, it matters), and its color is not specified. The meaning of the generic daisy is "innocence"; the same for the white daisy. Since they were at a military compound, it seems safe to disregard the garden daisy. The wild, or single field daisy, however, means "I will think of it". Either of these two meanings could apply to Dorcas. She has a child-like innocence and is struggling to recall her past. The change of flowers is

significant and has a clearer meaning.

Mrs. Burke agrees that the daisy is "innocence," but by that she means the field daisy. The garden daisy is "I partake your sentiments." The moonflower is a tropical plant, and unknown to Mrs. B, but the morning glory, to which it is a sort of cousin, means "affectation" in her book. Something to think about.

The moonflower is the common name for a member of the twining or creeping plants, such as the morning glory, which are part of the family called ipomoea. The meaning given to ipomoea is "attachment; I attach myself to you". In context, the meaning is clear enough, both literally and figuratively.

3) After escaping from the antechamber Sev rejoined the thespian group. An interesting side note is that, when he found the group, Dr. Talos was striking the heads from flowers with his cane, just as he did the night, near the end of SHADOW, when Sev and Dorcas came upon his encampment, the same night that the eidolons Marubius and Triskele appeared to him. Make of that what you will. At any rate, after a nap, Sev and Dorcas wandered away onto the grounds of the House Absolute to be alone and talk. (II, XXII) They passed through a grove of plum trees in bloom, and Dorcas put a twig of the white blossoms into her hair. Sev draws the distinction between the plum trees he and Jonas passed through on the way to the antechamber, which he judged to have been planted for ornamentation, and those he and Dorcas passed through, which he thought had been planted for the fruit. The distinction would be absolutely pointless but for the difference in the meaning attached to them. The wild plum tree means "independence", but the generic plum tree (presumably domesticated, cultivated for the fruit) means "keep your promise" or "genius".

Mrs. B differentiates three kinds of plum blossoms. The Indian plum is "privation;" the tree plum is "fidelity" (that's the one I would guess here); the wild plum is "independence."

Near the bench where they are sitting in a long-forgotten garden are a few beds of simple flowers and herbs--"rosemary, angelica, mint, basil, and rue", meaning, respectively, "remembrance", "inspiration", "virtue", "hatred (or "give me your good wishes")", and "disdain". [N1]

Mrs. B. agrees with the above. But I must admit I am suprised. What does one make of Keats's "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil?"

4) In Thrax, on the morning of the last day of her life with Sev, Dorcas cut her hair short and left their rooms after putting a white peony in her hair. (III, II) There are several meanings for the white peony: "anger", "bashfulness", "shame". Anger and shame are both indicated here. The book opens with Dorcas-- who fears and avoids water--recounting standing under a waterfall in the women's bath, trying to wash the stench of the prison tunnels out of her hair. She is angry with the women she heard talking about her, the paramour of a torturer, and the things they say about Sev. She is also angry with Sev, because she realizes what the women are saying is true. She feels shame for herself for putting up with it, for going to bed in a room atop those very tunnels. While listening to Dorcas air her feelings (III, I), Sev likens the yellow lights of the city below to a jonquil. The jonquil means "I desire a return of affection". Tough luck.

Mrs. B. doesn't include "anger" with the peony, only shame and bashfulness (odd, with such a showy flower). She agrees about the jonquil.

5) When Sev last sees Dorcas, it is in the ruins of lower Nessus. Traveling up the Gyll aboard the _Samru_, Sev spies "...a little boat, newly built, tied to an ancient pier." What follows is either an absolutely astonishing act of intuition or the one instance in the entire Urth Cycle when slow-witted Sev is smarter than the reader. He asks to be put ashore alongside the boat, and there reveals what else he saw from the deck of the ship; "...a wilted scarlet poppy left lying on the single seat." (IV, XXXII). By means inexplicable, he finds his way to the long-deserted shop where Dorcas had lived with her husband and child. "Perhaps it was no more than the perfume of the blossom she wore, because when I saw her she had an arum, freckled white and sweet as Dorcas herself had always been, thrust into her hair. No doubt she had brought it there for that purpose, and had taken out the wilted poppy and cast it down when she had tied up her boat." What purpose? As the text reads, it means the purpose of guiding him to her in the shop via the scent of the arum. Yet there is no way for her to know or even suspect that Sev is anywhere near Nessus. He enters the rear of the shop through "a narrow door hidden under ivy". The ivy vine means "matrimony, marriage". Inside, with her back to him, she is kneeling before a bier on which is the dead body of the old boatman, her former husband. Beside her is a basket "not small yet not large either".

The scarlet poppy is "fantastic extravagance;" I would tend to think that it refers to her life with Sev rather than to the boat; wilted, it has been cast off in favor of the symbols of love and fidelity. The arum is "ardour" (like Mrs. B., I use Brit spelling). For ivy, she adds "fidelity" to "marriage."

The generic meaning of a poppy, or of a red poppy, is "consolation", but that of a scarlet poppy is "fantastic extravagance". I don't know if Sev can tell the difference between red and scarlet. If taken literally, fantastic extravagance may refer to the expense of the "newly built" boat, a boat she will have little more use for. The arum has two meanings, "ardor" and "ferocity and deceit".[N2] I think the first of those meanings can be dismissed, given her circumstances. The spotted arum means both "ardor" and "great warmth". As for "ferocity and deceit", that depends on exactly what has been going on. There are lingering questions about exactly how she came to be in the Lake of Birds, but more and more of her memories had been coming back even before she left Sev. She may have remembered how she got there, which may relate to the old boatman's timely demise. Recall that in the same conversation that Sev and Dorcas had in the gardens of the House Absolute that I mentioned above, Dorcas objected to Dr. Talos having labeled Sev as Death, that he wasn't really like that. Sev called it a metaphor, and Dorcas said it was a bad metaphor. In the last paragraph of that chapter Sev wrote: "...it occurred to me to wonder whether Dr. Talos's calling Dorcas "Innocence" had not been a metaphor of the same kind."

I don't know what to say about the below either, except that these are all common wild plants. Loosestrife, a significant weed in America, was not known to Mrs. B; she might have put it with foxglove (another spiky plant), which means "insincerity."

[N1] "...twined lupine, purple loosestrife, and white meadow rue." are the wildflowers that deck the bowers of Sev and his fellow gods. Lupine (very Wolfean) means "voraciousness; inspiration; dejection". Loosestrife (*lysismachia vulgaris*) means "pretension". *Lysimachia* is Greek for "ending strife". Purple loosestrife (*lythrum salicaria*) derives its color from *lythrum*, a word from the Greek "*lythron*", meaning "blood". I don't know if the qualifiers "white" and "meadow" charge the meaning of white meadow rue (*thalictrum aquilegiifolium 'album'*) with any meaning beyond the typical meaning for rue of "disdain".

[N2] Dragonwort is another name for the common arum, as is wake-robin and snakeweed. Dragonwort means "horror" (as does mandrake) in the language of flowers. It is mentioned in the OED that those who carry the leaves and roots of the dragonwort are protected against vipers and serpents. In chapter XXVII of CLAW Dorcas likened the stream that she, Sev, and Jolenta camped beside to a big snake. Given her fear of water, she may have carried the arum in the boat with her down the Gyll to ameliorate her fear of the river.

-alga

Roy C. Lackey — 23 Jul 1999, 23:48 · follows Alice Turner

alga:

Thanks for taking an interest in the subject. And, as I said, there's a lot more of it in the NEW SUN books, more than is commonly realized, else someone would have written about it before. The flower references are everywhere. Your Mrs. Burke seems to be largely in agreement with the sources I used. The meanings that I listed for any particular flower were, when possible, those for which I found agreement in more than one source, but the meanings sometimes varied with both time and place. Most of the interest in the language of flowers seems to have been in Western Europe and never caught on well in the Americas.

Mrs. Burke was obviously English, and the water hyacinth is a native American plant, so she doesn't mention it. The water lily, however, stands for "purity of heart," which also pertains to Dorcas. The hyacinth itself, a quite different plant, is "sport, game, play."

The hyacinth matches up well with Silk's Hyacinth. Regarding the water lily: that is the shape of the boat ("shaped like the wide flower of the nenuphar") in which Severian and Jolenta had their little tryst in the gardens of the House Absolute. The color is not specified. Depending on the variety and color of lily the boat was meant to look like, the meanings range from: white= modesty and purity; yellow= falsehood; water lily= eloquence; day lily= coquetry; to yellow day lily= gaiety. On their way to the little river they "passed through a hawthorn hedge whose spotted white blossoms seemed from a distance to present an insurmountable barrier..." All the sources I've seen list the hawthorn meaning as "hope". What do you make of that?

[snip]

Mrs. B. agrees with the above. But I must admit I am surprised. What does one make of Keats's "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil?"

Oddly enough, after your Shakespearean garden post, I looked in Bartlett's, which lead me to that poem, but what a severed head watered with tears in a pot of basil may mean eludes me.

Roy

Peter Stephenson — 24 Jul 1999, 11:45 · follows Roy C. Lackey

"Roy C. Lackey" wrote:
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the little river they "passed through a hawthorn hedge whose spotted white blossoms seemed from a distance to present an insurmountable barrier..." All the sources I've seen list the hawthorn meaning as "hope". What do you make

of that?

Aha, that sounds to me distinctly Proustian. It may agree with the time themes present in that particular episode (starting at the beginning of the chapter with the comparison with the Atrium of Time). Proust has a long description of a hawthorn hedge in one of the earlier books --- I think it may even be along the way to Swann's place as mentioned in the title of book one. My Proust's a long way away, however, and I can't remember the detailed theme of his description. May someone can do us a favour? (Anyone for a `soomaring Prowst' competition? Come to think of it, I've got the original French with me somewhere, which I suspended reading for reasons which might be obvious if you look at my email address. But if I can find my French dictionary as well, I'll report back...)

corncrake

Alice Turner — 25 Jul 1999, 10:00 · follows Peter Stephenson

Mrs. Burke was obviously English, and the water hyacinth is a native American plant, so she doesn't mention it. The water lily, however, stands for "purity of heart," which also pertains to Dorcas. The hyacinth itself, a quite different plant, is "sport, game, play."

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the sources I've seen list the hawthorn meaning as "hope". What do you make of that?

Yes, I think Wolfe definitely has a book on flower language--Hy's name is all too apt. Mrs. B. agrees that hawthorn is "hope," but I can't say what the hedge means here. Here's a little personal anecdote on the nenuphar. I have a delightful newish friend, born Turkish, whose name is Nilufer. I asked her what it meant, and she told me "waterlily." Of course I thought immediately of Wolfe's nenuphars and told her about them; she asked for some backup (she's a lawyer!) and I sent her the following from the OED (as mantis knows, I am all too proud of my OED CD, which allows me to paste email in a trice). Nilufer and nenuphar are the same word.

nenuphar Also 68 -far, 6 -farre, 7 -fer (and erron. nune-, nemi-, nem-). [a. med.L. nenuphar, -far (It. and Sp. nenufar, F. n  nufar), ad. Arab.-Pers. n_nufar, n_lufar, Pers. also n_lufal, -pal, ad. Skr. n_l  tpala blue lotus, f. n_l blue + utpala lotus, water-lily.]

1. A water-lily, esp. the common white or yellow species. In early use freq. in oil, syrup, water of nenuphar. 1533 Elyot Cast. Helth (1534) 76 Syrope of violettes, nemipher, or the wine of sweet pomegranates. 1563 T. Gale Antidotarie i. viii. 5 Among compoundes these are in vse, butter, oile of roses, Violettes, Nenuphar, Popye. 1621 Burton Anat. Mel. ii. v. i. vi. (1651) 397 To refrigerate the face, by washing it often with Rose, Violet, Nenuphar, Lettuce, Lovage waters

and the like. 1612 Peacham Gentl. Exerc. iii. 162 Of Flowers you haue Roses, Gilliflowers, Violets, Nenuphar, Lilly. 1725 Bradley Fam. Dict. s.v. Syrup, Syrup of Nenuphar, or Water-Lilly. 1759 tr. Adanson's Voy. Senegal in Pinkerton Voy. (1814) XVI. 631 The leaves of the nenufar, or water-lilly. 1832 Lyell Princ. Geol. II. vi. 98 On these green isles of the Mississippi,..the pistia and nenuphar display their yellow flowers. 1858 O. W. Holmes Aut. Breakf.-t. x. (1891) 250 The stream with..clustering nenuphars Sprinkling its mirrored blue like golden-chaliced stars! 1874 A. O'Shaughnessy Music & Moonlight 14 Here and there great lakes of nenuphar And lustrous lotos glimmered. — b. petty nenuphar, applied by Turner (apparently) to the Marsh Marigold. Obs. 1548 Turner Names Herbs (E.D.S.) 26 It groweth in watery middowes with a leafe like a water Rose, wherefore it may be called also Petie nunefar [sic].

2. Ent. (See quot.) rare1.

1852 T. W. Harris Insects New Eng. 66 A small beetle of the weevil tribe, called Rhynchænus Nenuphar, the Nenuphar or plum-weevil.

-alga