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Hyacinths and Narcissi: The Flowers of Uranian Poetry from Decadence to Modernism

Abstract: It was in *Love in Earnest* (1970), one of the rare studies ever written on Uranian poetry, that Timothy d'Arch Smith chose the name 'Uranians' to designate a group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys and poetry in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930. These poets resorted to a set of symbols and imagery as a mode to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real 'fashion', an artistic attitude that might well be defined as 'Decadent Neoclassicism'. The aim of this article is to examine the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, and more specifically two peculiar flowers often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their employment goes beyond aesthetic choices, as they are part of those ways adopted to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Once outlined the polarities of an aporia of light and shade, candour and censorship, which can be traced in different hues in each and every author and text of my corpus, I will consider the possible Uranian influences on the works of those who, at least in their explicit intentions, would flee from such a poetics: the Modernist poets.

Keywords: Uranian poetry. Mark André Raffalovich. T.S. Eliot. Flowers in literature. Hyacinth. Narcissus.

… here shall be comrades thick as flowers.
John Addington Symonds, "The Song of Love and Death"

1. *Uranian Poetry, or, Of the Ways of Evasion*

In 1893 John Addington Symonds, already the author of two of the first modern treatises on homosexuality, *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), was asked by Bosie Douglas for contributions to his *Spirit Lamp*, the Oxford undergraduate periodical he had just taken over. Symonds's poem about the mythological figure of Leander was published a few months later; there, Leander is described as the "Living image of Uranian Love", an adjective that still passed "without offence".[1] It was in *Love in Earnest*, one of the rare studies published on Uranian poetry, that Timothy d'Arch Smith chose the name 'Uranians' to designate a group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys, less often for adult men, to whom they dedicated their works in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930.[2]

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[1] T. d'Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930*, London, Routledge, 1970, p. 17.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. xxi.

These poets shared a set of common images and symbols as a strategic way to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating the *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real 'fashion', an artistic attitude that might well be defined as 'Decadent Neoclassicism'.

Edward Carpenter, William Johnson Cory, Aleister Crowley, Lord Alfred Douglas, Sholto Douglas, John Gambril Nicholson, Frederick Rolfe 'Baron Corvo', John Addington Symonds, just to mention a few better-known names, produced and shared poems and prose texts, but also pamphlets, essays, photographs, and paintings about boy-love. Their source of inspiration, and somehow a handy justification for their art, when necessary, rested on the concept of Greek *paiderastia*, which was very common within the neoplatonic wave at the university of Oxford and Cambridge at the time. The word 'Uranian' comes from the theory of Heavenly Love (*ourànios*) associated with Uranus's daughter, who had no mother: in ancient Greece, this kind of love was usually felt for boys in a phase of developing maturity who showed signs of intelligence, and with whom a life-long partnership was possible. 'Calamites' was another option that d'Arch Smith finally discarded, a word coined by Swinburne for Symonds and his followers after the "Calamus" section of *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman (who always denied any alleged allusion to male-male love in his work and life). 'Uranian' was chosen simply because it was frequently used in those circles, and because it was free from the scientific or negative connotations carried by 'homosexual', 'paederast' and 'calamite'. The term had in fact become of common use after its adoption by the German activist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs in a series of studies published from 1864 to 1865 (collected under the title *Forschungen über das Räthsel der mannmännlichen Liebe*, i.e. *The Riddle of Man-Manly Love*); both Symonds and Edward Carpenter took on the term (the latter, in *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women*, used it to describe a comradeship love that would bring about true democracy). Oscar Wilde himself must have been acquainted and at ease with the word, as he once wrote in one of his letters to Robert Ross: "To have altered my life would have been to have admitted that uranian love is ignoble. I hold it to be noble – more noble than other forms".[3]

Such expressions had to remain unspoken in all contexts in the late Victorian era: if it is true that Uranian poetry was quite widespread and even had its own publications, out of that circle same-sex love was still deemed an 'abominable vice' and, also, an illegal act. Still, they found many ways to publish a fair number of poetry collections, moving quite deftly between censorship and self-censorship, and creating a little niche for an affective (more than aesthetic) propaganda out of a hideout in Victorian morality. *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*, *The Quorum: A Magazine of Friendship*, *The Spirit Lamp*, *Chamaleon*, and *The Savoy* were the titles of the journals that hosted their texts as in a little, private ritual which only a restricted group of people sharing the same homoerotic taste could access or recognise. These works created a network of images and references to classical *topoi* and characters, but also to a post-Romantic, Decadent, and eventually wartime symbolism – flowers, war, death. Between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, before giving way to the semantic ambiguity of Modernism, an

[3] O. WILDE, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds M. HOLLAND and R. HART DAVIS, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2000, p. 1019.

anchor of significance was kept in literary texts as well as in social constructions through traditional forms such as the sonnet, the pastoral, and the elegy. Besides prosody and figures of speech, the imagery had to be reassuring, too. In the case of Uranian poetry, saints, myths, narcissi and hyacinths explicitly referred to the neo-Hellenistic culture in vogue, while implicitly pointing to the gay subculture associated with it.

Flowers represent an interesting, almost obsessive presence in Uranian poetry, in most cases to be seen as a post-Romantic legacy, but also as a typical element of a Decadent decorative aesthetics. Although the outcome may often be repetitive, pedantic, and commonplace poetry, a number of more inspired and original works can be found as well. The aim of this article is to examine the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, and more specifically two peculiar flowers often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their adoption goes beyond aesthetic choices, as they are part of those more or less complex discursive strategies employed to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Once outlined the borders of an aporia of light and shade, candour and censorship, which can be traced in different hues in each and every author and text of this canon, I wish to consider possible Uranian influences on the works of those who, at least in their explicit intentions, would take a totally different direction, namely the Modernist poets.

2. *'Making Cattleya' with Flowers: Uranian Love and Floriography*

The continuous movement among genres and semantic fields pivoting on well-known images sinuously draws on escamotages, camouflages, and dislocations meant to conceal the beloved one's sexual identity. Flowers are employed, just like various other codes, to veil meanings and referents in the poems. Several clusters of such images can be traced in Uranian poetry, some of them quite explicit, while others, like flowers, relatively more vague. The reference to classical myths, for example, or to famous gay figures and couples could easily ring a bell to receptive ears: Hadrian and Antinous, Edward II and Piers Gaveston, Zeus and Ganymede, Adonis, Michelangelo, Achilles and Patroclus, and, of course, Hyacinth and Narcissus. Sometimes there were also clear statements concerning the superiority of pederastic passions, or fairly evident contents, whether overtly sensual or spiritual, as when words such as 'guilt', 'shame' or 'foul sin' were attached to the poet's love, the most famous example being Lord Alfred Douglas's "Two Loves" (1894). All this might be accompanied by feelings of regret and nostalgia for the loss and fugacity of youth and its symbols (beardless faces, innocent looks and so forth). More subtle were the allusions to silence, pain and unhappiness as the only possible destiny for the lovers. This fate could be associated with other kinds of forbidden love, but also with Biblical and Christian figures, such as David and Jonathan, Saint Sebastian and other boy saints, or with Christ himself, whose image became more and more present in poetry as war approached.

One could also detect oblique references to 'the prince and the pauper theme', in d'Arch Smith's definition of the representation of a rich man courting a younger, less

well-off boy. Finally, there were flowers, one of the most common elements in lyric poetry, especially from Romanticism onwards, starting with Novalis's blue flower to Oscar Wilde's green carnation. Daffodils – which are the equivalent of narcissi – had already been extolled by William Wordsworth in "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807) in all their golden beauty and glee, while in Book II of *Endymion* (1818), John Keats showed a sleeping Adonis adorned with all kinds of flowers, mixing classical iconography with botanical details as if to represent the body's erotic vulnerability.[4] Romantic poetry dealt with various forms of longing, more often than not with an indefinite desire, a mysterious aspiration, an unresting spleen, a vague sense of loss and/or unification with the infinite; in this perspective, flowers became an expedient for reflections, or a vehicle for giving vent to one's dissatisfaction with reality.

It was during the Victorian age that flowers were invested with a more 'scientific' symbolism, although 'floriography' (the 'language of flowers') had actually originated in France during Romanticism: *Le langage des fleurs*, the first popular book on the subject, was published in 1819 by Charlotte de La Tour, even if Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762) had already introduced the craze in England, to say nothing of the orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall's *Dictionnaire du language des fleurs* (1809), which contained a whole list of flowers accompanied by their symbolic definitions. Floriography soon gained popularity, and publications of various flower dictionaries were quick to follow. They were all quite similar, containing an alphabetical list of flowers with their symbolic meanings and explanations regarding how these metaphorical traits variously derived from classical mythology, folklore, legends, art, poetry, and horticulture.[5] During the Victorian age, the Romantic features associated with flowers became imbued with deeper secret allusions and worked as a means of covert communication, in a period which also witnessed a growing interest in botany. Indeed, Victorians often exchanged small 'talking bouquets' ('nosegays' or 'tussie-mussies'), which they wore or carried as a fashion accessory.

It is worth recalling that, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Robert Tyas had published *The Sentiment of Flowers; or, Language of Flora*, which first came out in 1836 and would be followed by numerous editions up to the end of the century. The strict etiquette that governed social interaction in the Victorian era contributed to the creation of a set of images associated with flowers to express feelings and emotions that could not be spoken aloud; this was absolutely in tune with the sense of secrecy underpinning Uranian poetry, a strategy of communication between lovers (or, most often, a form of liberating soliloquy) while 'inking one's fingers', to reverse Mary Montagu's description of the Turkish *sélam*,[6] but avoiding the hullabaloo, and dangers, of explicit homosexual references.

[4] See M. ROBERTS, "The Eroticization of Sleep in the Poetry of John Keats", *English: Journal of the English Association*, 72 (276-277), 2023, pp. 40-54.

[5] For an engaging survey of floriographical books and the usage of flowers in everyday life during the Victorian age, see M. KIRKBY, *A Victorian Flower Dictionary: The Language of Flowers Companion*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2011.

[6] The origin of the western language of flowers was probably inspired by the Turkish *sélam*, a method of communicating (especially between lovers) thanks to which it was possible to send messages 'without ever inking your fingers', i.e. through flowers and objects. The recipient had to decode the message by singling out words rhyming with the object in question.

Symbolisation is extremely variable across space and time. European Decadence privileged a certain number of flowers: the rose was one of the Decadent flowers *par excellence* (as it had been in William Shakespeare's sonnets), and also classically Uranian, since in ancient Greece roses were a symbol of pederasty – handsome boys were called 'roses' in homoerotic poems, as in Solon, Straton, Meleager, Rhianus, and Philostratus.[7] Lilies, orchids, and foxgloves were other allusive flowers easily found in Decadent writers (e.g. Gabriele d'Annunzio, Giovanni Pascoli, Marcel Proust, Wilde) because of their sensual features and perfume, this being another crucial element in Aestheticism from A.C. Swinburne onwards, including some of the authors of the Uranian group (Edmund Gosse, Arthur Symons, Mark André Raffalovich, besides Symonds and Wilde).[8] After all, the strange beauty of these flowers can be easily associated with the refined, free, exotic, and mellifluous taste of Decadent writers. It is within this framework that we must examine the Uranian language of flowers more closely, because the imaginative influence and identity of these authors would also pervade the works of those who did not belong to their circle.

Similarly to other kinds of Decadent poetry, Uranian verse includes many sorts of flowers, from the most exotic to the most common ones, even though we can find a certain predilection for traditional symbols. The already mentioned "Two Loves" by Lord Alfred Douglas, ending with the famous line "I am the love that dare not speak its name", is a flower-filled Sapphic poem:

I dreamed I stood upon a little hill,
And at my feet there lay a ground, that seemed
Like a waste garden, flowering at its will
With buds and blossoms. There were pools that dreamed
Black and unruffled; there were white lilies
A few, and crocuses, and violets
Purple or pale, snake-like fritillaries
Scarce seen for the rank grass, and through green nets
Blue eyes of shy pervenche winked in the sun.
And there were curious flowers, before unknown,
Flowers that were stained with moonlight, or with shades
Of Nature's wilful moods; and here a one
That had drunk in the transitory tone
Of one brief moment in a sunset; blades
Of grass that in an hundred springs had been
Slowly but exquisitely nurtured by the stars,
And watered with the scented dew long cupped
In lilies, that for rays of sun had seen
Only God's glory, for never a sunrise mars
The luminous air of Heaven.[9]

[7] See J. Géczi, "The Rose in Ancient Greek Culture", *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education*, 1 (1), 2006, pp. 1-83.

[8] For the role played by scent and perfume in Victorian literary culture, see C. Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*, Oxford, OUP, 2017.

[9] Lord A. Douglas, "Two Loves", 1894, ll. 1-20, https://poets.org/poem/two-loves (last accessed on 25 November 2023).

It should then come as no surprise to learn that 'evening botanist' was a circumlocution referring to a queer man. The list included the violet for Sappho, the calamus for Walt Whitman, the green carnation for Wilde and his friends, and the pansy for all; since the 1920s, lavender was also associated with non-binary identities.

In one single collection by Mark André Raffalovich, meaningfully titled *Tuberose and Meadosweet* (1885), there are references to botanical specimen of hyacinth, narcissus, honeysuckle, tuberose, meadowsweet, foxglove, syringa, stramonium (thorn apple), crane's bill, hibiscus, philadelphus (mock orange), edelweiss, convolvulus, nenuphar (water lily), nettle, clematis, ivy, pelargonium, mimosa, and also abstractions such as flowers of the sea, of death, of the past, of love, of the wind (anemone). In a period when sexologists were attempting to medicalise homosexuality and politicians were criminalising it, Uranians struggled to justify it culturally and to encode same-sex sexualities through the various languages available, as Ed Madden explains in "Say It With Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich". According to Madden, Raffalovich occupied a peculiar niche:

> While other writers of the 1880s and 1890s were attempting to 'write' homosexuality through the cultural languages of sexology, decadent aestheticism, or classical literature, Raffalovich turned to the Victorian 'language of flowers' – a language of romance and courtship codified in the floral dictionaries and gilt-bound gift books of the period – and he used this sentimental, heterosexual, and usually feminized language to portray homosexual love. *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* marks a noteworthy albeit marginal moment in the larger literary exploration of homosexual identity, and a transitional moment in floral iconography: that cultural moment when Raffalovich coded homosexuality in the clichés of heterosexual courtship, queering the language of flowers.[10]

Madden sees the poet's use of a heteronormative cultural code to articulate homosexual desire as resulting in a doubled text, "a queered one".[11] Raffalovich, the son of a wealthy Russian Jewish family born in Odessa, studied at Oxford and moved to London, where he established a salon also attended by Wilde (who frequently taunted him about the salon and also his physical aspect). Raffalovich is mostly remembered for being John Gray's lifelong companion and the author of sexological essays in French, rather than for his poetry, which, admittedly, was not particularly successful, although among the best within the Uranian group. He produced his first book, *Cyril and Lionel and Other Poems: A Volume of Sentimental Studies*, in 1884, the same year Kate Greenaway wrote her *Language of Flowers*, a gift book still published today. However, Raffalovich's volume seemed to mark an end for this flower-code vogue, with "the loss of interest in the language per se and the beginning of a nostalgic sentimentalisation of this Victorian phenomenon":[12]

> On the one hand, Raffalovich seems to appropriate a language already clichéd and outdated; on the other, in an era paradoxically marked by both increasing openness in discussing homosexuality and increasing criminalization of homosexual activity, Raffalovich seems to have chosen an innocuous

[10] E. MADDEN, "Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich", *College Literature*, 24 (1), 1997, pp. 11-12.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[12] B. SEATON, *The Language of Flowers: A History*, Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1995, p. 93.

code for something otherwise dangerous to represent. The language of flowers was explicitly a language of heterosexual love and courtship – primarily "the language of the love affair" and primarily a feminine code.[13]

Therefore, we could argue that Raffalovich did with earlier Victorian language what T.S. Eliot was to do with Raffalovich's writing, as I will suggest in the closing section of this study. "By the end of the century", continues Madden,

homoerotic writing was full of flowers, and by the 1890s, as Neil Bartlett has noted, flowers had become important components of "an elaborate imagery and system of beliefs associated with homosexuality" […]. Raffalovich's poetry seems to fall in a moment of transition, a moment when the language of flowers was readily appropriated, its heteronormativity troubled.[14]

Thus, Raffalovich can be said to have queered the language of flowers, "a language that was itself part of the very furniture of the Victorian household, those giftbooks featured on the parlor table".[15] This language of simultaneous evasion and encoding had already been purged from bourgeois sentimentality within *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which hothouse flowers and orchids became part of a *fin-de-siècle* cult of artificiality. For his part, Raffalovich created a rich bouquet throughout his poetry collection. For example, orchids sometimes peep out, as in "Friends and Lovers": "Perverse! […]/ Would/ The lover of the common rose exclude/ (As I his full rose from my buttonhole)/ Your scented orchids in this Chinese bowl".[16] The title *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* is similarly allusive, with the tuberose evoking "dangerous pleasures" and "voluptuousness" (in the Victorian age, its perfume was thought to excite European young ladies) and the meadowsweet standing for "virginity" or "uselessness". Together, they would symbolise the "nonprocreative and 'dangerous' pleasures of homosexual love".[17] Along the same lines, the atmosphere of silence and secrecy (another trope of Uranian poetry) pervading the book is linked to flowers, as their muteness emerges as a mark of complicit understanding: "If each flower cannot tell, at least each knows".[18] Interestingly, in the sonnet "Flower of Love", Raffalovich combines the motif of silence with the images of a rose and an orchid:

Because we sing where loneliness secludes
The sighing moonlit space for us to meet,
Nor turn to part until the bitter east
Our sad and crowded wilderness disclose,
They call that sickly which perfumes at least
Our mystic moments: not unlike the rose
The foreign orchid flutters when 'tis stirred.
Enough! Enough! Too much the world has heard.[19]

[13] E. MADDEN, "Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich", p. 13.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 14.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 13.
[16] M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *In Fancy Dress*, London, Walter Scott, 1886, p. 56.
[17] E. MADDEN, "Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich", p. 15.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 19.
[19] M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, London, David Nutt, 1885, p. 64.

For Raffalovich, letting flowers speak their coded language is too dangerous: "while the rose is simply cliché, the orchid 'tells' too much".[20] And so it was. Reviewing *Tuberose and Meadowsweet* in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Wilde wrote: "To say of these poems that they are unhealthy and bring with them the heavy odours of the hothouse is to point out neither their defect nor their merit, but their quality merely".[21] The process of transformation from the "nostalgic, sentimental, heterosexual, and naturalized code" to the "new and wicked meanings", to use Madden's words again, had begun, and

> by 1911 the floral had become so much a part of homoerotic verse that John Gambril Nicholson would call a collection *A Garland of Ladslove*, punning on the name of the plant. Not only could Wilde in 1895 refer to two young men as "flowers of the narcissus kind" to describe their sexual predilections […], but an attention to the floral itself was read as a sign of sexuality.[22]

If Miss Prism in *The Importance of Being Earnest* could say naturally: "I spoke horticulturally" (II.87), at one point Raffalovich himself stopped writing and turned to the 'minor art' of flower arrangement. He was one of the poets who succeeded in strengthening the mythological power of flowers in the *fin de siècle*, 'catachresising' their sexual connotation, making them physicalised recipients, parts of the lover's body; he came just a step behind their final de-romanticisation, before their aestheticist banalisation and final sterilisation carried out by the Modernists.

3. *Narcissi and Hyacinths: Stratifying the* Fin de Siècle

In Greek mythology, the hyacinth originated when Hyakinthos, a youth from Sparta, had his skull accidentally crushed by Apollo's discus and through the agency of Zephyr, who blew it from its course, while the origin of the narcissus is related to Narcissus's suicide, after he fell in love with his own reflection and realised that his feelings would never be reciprocated. In *The Sentiment of Flowers*, the 1841 English version of *Langage des Fleurs* by Madame de La Tour, the hyacinth is associated with game and play; it is also described as melancholic, probably for its fate, as it "[…] weeps/ all night, and never lifts an eye all day". Interestingly enough, in the 1858 American version of the book, *The Poetry of Flowers and Flowers of Poetry*, the hyacinth does not symbolise play, but only grief. At the end of the century, in Greenaway's *Language of Flowers*, white hyacinths symbolise instead a kind of unobtrusive loveliness. Finally, in the more recent *Tussie-Mussies: The Victorian Art of Expressing Yourself in the Language of Flowers* (1993), by Geraldine Adamich Laufer, blue hyacinths are associated with kindliness and sport as well as with a vein of platonic friendship/camaraderie. As for the narcissus, its meaning is more stable: the flower suggests egotism, self-love, and self-esteem; the so-called 'false narcissus' also symbolises delusive hope. It is noteworthy that the etymology of 'Narcissus' comes from the Greek 'narkào' ('to

[20] E. MADDEN, "Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich", p. 20.

[21] Quoted in T. D'ARCH SMITH, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English 'Uranian' Poets from 1889 to 1930*, pp. 30-31.

[22] E. MADDEN, "Say It with Flowers: The Poetry of Marc-André Raffalovich", pp. 23, 25.

stun'), referring to the intense, penetrating smell of some specimen of this species.

Needless to say, in Uranian poems these two flowers are extremely common and resonant with a stratified symbolic imagery. Incidentally, the Uranian movement is considered to have begun precisely with the publication of the poem "Hyacinthus" by Charles Kains Jackson in *The Artist* on 1 April 1888. The first issue of the fourth volume of *The Spirit Lamp*, the other major publication affiliated with the Uranian movement, included instead the Hyacinthus sonnet by Pierre Louÿs, published anonymously and glossed in these terms: "A letter written in prose poetry by Mr Oscar Wilde to a friend, and translated into rhymed poetry by a poet of no importance". Wilde had written a passionate letter to Alfred Douglas, in which he praised the sonnet Douglas had sent him ("In Sarum Close") and compared the young man to the classical figure of Hyacinthus (the letter was later cited in the infamous trial).[23] Wilde asked Louÿs, who had attended the opening night of *A Woman of No Importance* (hence the allusion to "a poet of no importance"), to translate the letter into French and turn it into poetry to escape blackmail (the use of French was another 'way of evasion', as Symonds would call it, adopted by the Uranian poets). Wilde had written: "I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days", and, in a letter to Robert Ross: "Bosie has insisted on stopping here for sandwiches. He is quite like a narcissus – so white and gold. […] Bosie is so tired: he lies like a hyacinth on the sofa, and I worship him".[24] In Louÿs's sonnet, the poet awaits Hyacinthus's return: "'Va! rafraîchis tes mains dans le clair crepuscule/ Des choses où descend l'âme antique. Et reviens,/ Hyacinthe adoré! hyacinthe!/ hyacinthe!".[25] Douglas himself would contribute to the April 1893 issue of *The Artist* with a poem titled "Hyacinthus".

Narcissus appears in the works of a controversial author such as Eric Stenbock and is in full-bloom on the front page of the 1873 poetry collection by Edward Carpenter, one of the major Uranian writers, famous for his studies defending homosexuality, for his collection of gay writing and for having inspired E.M. Forster's *Maurice*. Carpenter published the collection at his own expenses, under the title *Narcissus, and Other Poems*. His "Narcissus" is a long poem in rhyming couplets with a classical bucolic atmosphere telling the story of the mythological figure, and also including a song allegedly dedicated to him by the nymph Echo. No real Uranian connotation can be found in Carpenter's poem, except for the fascination with the mythological figure, which was yet to be queered by the pen of Raffalovich.

In *Cyril and Lionel* (1884), Raffalovich had written: "Ah! dear, learn this, that love has many names".[26] The names of these flowers are quite common and intelligible. Together with other classical gay icons, Hyacinth and Narcissus appear as both mythological figures and flowers. In the last poem of the collection, "A Child's Vision",

[23] See L. DOWLING, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*, Ithaca, Cornell U.P., 1996, p. 149.

[24] O. WILDE, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*.

[25] X. GIUDICELLI, "Butterflies, Orchids and Wasps. Polyglossia and Aesthetic Lives: Foreign Languages in *The Spirit Lamp* (1892-1893)", *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* [Online], 78, 2013, http://journals.openedition.org/cve/930; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/cve.930 (last accessed on 28 July 2023).

[26] M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Cyril and Lionel and Other Poems: A Volume of Sentimental Studies*, London, Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1884, p. 27.

a boy that picks "narcissi and hyacinths" has a vision of "a gracious knight of Grecian chivalry".[27] Chivalry is another *topos* of Uranian poetry, strictly connected with the 'New Chivalry' spreading between the 1830s and 1850s within the Oxford Movement, which mixed neoplatonic and neogothic ideals and set out to romanticise homoerotic relations between men and boys (later on, it became associated with a right-wing aesthetics of body and discipline). Hyacinth also appears in "The Renewal of Love":

The Sun did not unfold a sharper grief,
Lost dizzily in sorrow's labyrinth,
When for the Lady of the laurel-leaf
He sighed, or wept for fairer Hyacinth.[28]

In the same book, the sonnet "Narcissus" ends with a couplet that perfectly captures gay love through queered language: "A modern symbol of a soul's desire,/ Narcissus blooms beneath the morning fire".[29] The poem describes empty woods in an essentially traditional pastoral mode: only in the twelfth line do they become "visioned woods of long ago", a phrase which romantically changes the horizon from a mere description to the poet's personal experience, ending with an image of the myth. This is a good example of the typical Uranian adaptation of floriography and myth in *fin-de-siècle* poetry, with the progress towards the new century's Modernist decomposition lying not too far ahead.

In *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, the two flowers recur quite often: Narcissus can be found in "Mystic Love", a long sequence of different types of sonnets:

Herald of beauty, well of early grace
And love, could young Narcissus see thy face,
A holy miracle, a marvel fresh,
Before the altar built of lovely stone,
His hearth would surely practise like my own
Soul's worship in the temple of the flesh.[30]

The figure also appears in "To Narcissus", with the explicit address "O fair Narcissus! has he understood/ What pool this is and in what silent wood?".[31] The poet begs him to break the spell, to 'unsay' the words whispered by a god. Even more evocatively, "A Lover's Apology" begins with these explicit lines:

When I call Hyacinth or Helen fair,
And Paris-like I love, or like Apollo,
O do not think me false, or my words hollow;
O do not scorn for this my constant care.
For I must climb each step of Beauty's stair,
And Hyacinth or Jason I must follow,
Must southward hurry like the fleetest swallow,

[27] *Ibidem*, p. 101.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 91.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 65.
[30] M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*, p. 22.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 26.

Bearing with me thy kisses everywhere.[32]

The poem is quite unambiguous as it goes on saying that Hyacinth must be followed upon "Beauty's stair": evidently, this is the right direction to pursue in the progress towards the lover's 'private' self-fashioning – a self-construction through different phases of love (embodied by Hyacinth, but also Helen), already bearing "kisses everywhere", a line that makes this poem particularly carnal and voluptuous.

In the collection *In Fancy Dress* too, even though the rose seems to appear more frequently, we find a significant recurrence concerning a hyacinth place showing up near Gaveston's tomb in "As You Like It": "Then shall I listen to your singing/ That languid music of some one/ Who heard the hyacinth bells ringing/ Ah! for slain Piers of Gaveston;/ In Warwickshire, that haunted us:/ The hyacinth place, the pleasing weather,/ On Blacklow Hill, near Gaveston's Cross!".[33] In "Rosa's Chamber", chestnut hair is visible across "the blue of the hyacinth bells",[34] and there are also references to "eyes the colour of the hyacinth's blue".[35] Still, the most resounding poem including narcissi and hyacinths in Raffalovich's poetry is the sonnet "Ganymede of Ida":

Death, lamentation, music, flowers, and song,
Worship and scent and much idolatry,
Incense that burns all day and all night long:
For those the world's desire – but not for thee.
Thy perfect limbs we praise, but not with sighs:
On the Hellenic brows, O tearless lad,
Unaltered oleanders Grecian-wise,
Serene and faultless and forever glad.
But ah! for Syrian Adonis slain
Blood-red anemones we twine indeed;
And hyacinths narcissus-like mean pain.
Such flowers should never fade for Ganymede,
But where the ancient waters close and smile,
For Hylas and the Darling of the Nile.[36]

We can be sure that anyone vaguely familiar with the things of the world would have recognised the numerous references to Uranism in a poem like this: hyacinths are directly compared to narcissi, both referring to a common, unavoidable feeling such as pain. Pain is what Ganymede experiences, but beauty, and the kind of love associated with these flowers, should never fade for him, as for Hylas and Antinous, "the Darling of the Nile".

Far from being exhaustive, this list of poetic examples aims to give an idea about how profusely these two flowers, together with their myths, imbued Uranian poetry at the end of the century, particularly in the poet that perhaps more than others epitomised a borderline between two epochs. Narcissi and hyacinths also make their

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 56.
[33] M.A. RAFFALOVICH, *In Fancy Dress*, p. 20.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 52.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 95.

appearance in an encyclopaedic bouquet in one of the poems of the sequence "Rose Leaves When the Rose is Dead" included in *In Fancy Dress*:

Red lilies when thou lovest me,
White lilies for all men to see,
And purple, purple clematis
A flame against the sky

Heart's ease when men see us apart,
Sad hyacinth upon thy hearth, –
But poppies, poppies should we kiss,
And poppies when we die.[37]

In the language of flowers, poppies usually mean consolation, but at the end of the nineteenth century, as Paul Fussell observes, the poppy, which traditionally symbolised sacrifice and remembrance in English poetry, also began to convey a sense of homoerotic passion.[38]

At the end of the Victorian era, the craze of the language of flowers began to vanish. The Great war would change forever not only the symbolism of flowers and its usage, but also the way of living relations with human beings and with technological objects. The time of Victorian sentimentality was running out; poetry would soon be filled with dead branches.

4. *Beyond Victorianism: War, Modernism, and Uranian Flowers*

At the turn of the century, the connotation of flowers developed along two major directions: the imagery related to war and the imagery that was to collide with, and partly be absorbed by, high Modernism. Flowers faded and became part of that 'heap of broken images' upon which T.S. Eliot built his Modernist epic. What I would like to point out in these final sections is that Uranian symbolism, in particular the one focusing on Hyacinth and Narcissus, played a significant role in Modernist poetry, and more specifically in Eliot's works.

I would like to draw on a critical framework underpinned by contemporary paradigms of literary criticism that tend to abolish, or at least soften, the Victorian-Modernist divide, keeping in mind that it was precisely in that period that the First World War and the constructions of masculinity intersected the life and poetry of Eliot. Symbolism, Uranism, and Aestheticism were bound to meet the war itself and the soldiers' notions of masculinity, resulting into an intensification of the homoerotic element in the poetry written by soldier poets.[39] The first to postulate this idea was Paul Fussell in 1975, in his renowned work *The Great War and Modern Memory*. As

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 79.
[38] See P. FUSSELL, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford, OUP, (1975) 2013, pp. 247-48.
[39] See P. QUERY, "'They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl': T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity", *Yeats Eliot Review*, 18 (3), 2002, pp. 10-21.

we have already mentioned, Uranism led to two modes of influence in the early twentieth-century poetry: the representation of comradeship and brotherhood associated with pain and loss in war poetry, and the absorption and reformulation of myths and imagery in Modernist writing. In Eliot, the two polarities met, as we shall see shortly.

Recent criticism on Modernism has argued in favour of a continuity, rather than a break, with Victorian poetics, analysing different aspects, from gender to culture and aesthetics. After the classic studies on the transition from the Victorian Age to Modernism by scholars such as Stefano Evangelista, Laura Marcus, and Vincent Sherry, this direction also informs the more recent *Victorian Modernism* (2002) by Jessica Feldman, *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations* (2017), edited by Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer and Christine Reynier, and *Beyond the Victorian/Modernist Divide* (2018), edited by Anne-Florence Gillard-Estrada and Anne Besnault-Levita, among others. The connections we are trying to map here between Uranian decadent neoclassicism and Modernist impersonality follow the same route.

Fussell examined the significance of the historical proximity of the war to the homoerotic artistic movements that preceded it – i.e. Uranians – reaching the conclusion that the world of Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, David Jones and others was one "of reinvigorated myth",[40] due to a lack of 'official' information at the front lines, the resurgence of oral traditions, the desire to attach meaningful frameworks to the otherwise incomprehensible existence of trench soldiers. Myths were found where they could. Even before the war, Uranian poets used to write elegies for the death of imaginary young soldiers – another way of evasion to praise male-male love, false *in-memoriam* testaments for boys who never went to war. The elegies on dead boys were so fashionable at the turn of the century that, by the onset of the war, soldiers were quite familiar with homoerotic images expressed in verse – and in fact homoeroticism, rather than homosexuality, had a more meaningful impact on male artistic consciousness: "Indeed, the matter of male poetic homoeroticism, as opposed to nineteenth century definitions of 'clinical' homosexuality, refers not very much to 'the practice of sodomy' but rather to 'a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul', or, in this case, of the poetic consciousness".[41]

At the same time, Uranian imagery penetrated the works written by authors who fervently repudiated their Romantic past, as in Eliot's case, evolving into a new, richer symbolic structure which is highly multilayered, allusive, palimpsestic, and metareferential. Narcissus and Hyacinth constitute clusters of those symbols. A first example is to be found in a poem by Ezra Pound, who might actually have stolen it from other contemporaries, or the Coran, or again a nameless ancient Persian poet:

Hast thou 2 loaves of bread
Sell one + with the dole
Buy straightaway some hyacinths
To feed thy soul.[42]

[40] P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 124.

[41] P. Query, "'They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl': T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity", p. 10.

[42] D. Swift, "Lost and Pound", *The Paris Review*, 2 October 2017, https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/02/lost-and-pound/.

Hyacinths often appear to be given as a present in Modernist poetry, a characteristic that implies some sort of reliance on, or openness to their symbolism. On the other hand, we will see shortly how Pound was to cut more than one suggestive line from the manuscript of *The Waste Land*.

Another notable author to consider is Hilda Doolittle, an imagist poet close to Pound and William Carlos Williams, whose works are characterised by a powerful imagery and use of classical mythology. One poem is particularly significant for our analysis, i.e. "Evadne":

I first tasted under Apollo's lips,
love and love sweetness,
I, Evadne;
my hair is made of crisp violets
or hyacinth which the wind combs back
across some rock shelf;
I, Evadne,
was mate of the god of light.[43]

Evadne, the mythological figure who refused to marry Apollo and chose a mortal instead, is vaguely reminiscent of the hyacinth girl in *The Waste Land*, playing on light, rock, and hyacinths. Some critics and biographers believe, however, that the major inspiration for Eliot's featuring of the hyacinth girl was Emily Hale, an American drama teacher and an almost lifelong friend with whom he frequently corresponded (he used to write twice-weekly letters to her).[44] Quite a conspicuous number of other interpreters believe that the hyacinth girl might instead refer to a man, Jean Verdenal, Eliot's housemate and intimate friend for a short period in 1910. Verdenal died as a soldier in Gallipoli, drowned in the mud: he is the 'dead by water', and it is indeed to him that the poem consecrates much of its symbolism. The entire *Waste Land* might arguably be read as a long, disrupted elegy for his loss.

The first allusion to submerged homosexual connotations in the poem was made during Eliot's lifetime by John Peter, in 1952, a supposition to which the poet responded with disgusted denials, also trying to stop the circulation of the article by legal action.[45] Many other critics have however pursued the same line, namely Wayne Koestenbaum, Colleen Lamos, John Mayer, James E. Miller, Peter M. Sacks, and the already mentioned Patrick Query. According to Mayer, the figure of Verdenal has a strong connection with the Hyacinth myth, depicting "a love between males that ends in tragic loss";[46] and, back in 1972, Wilson Knight had affirmed that Eliot did not undertake to diminish this significance in his evocation of the myth.[47] Some doubts remain on this last point, since, on more than one occasion, Eliot would censor his poems so as to silence similar echoes. Apart from his private letters, two cases are par-

[43] H. DOOLITTLE, *Hymen*, London, The Egoist Press, 1921, p. 34.
[44] See L. GORDON, *The Hyacinth Girl. T.S. Eliot's Hidden Muse*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.
[45] See J. PETER, "A New Interpretation of *The Waste Land* (1952)", *Essays on Criticism*, 19 (2), 1969, pp. 140-75.
[46] J.T. MAYER, *T.S. Eliot's Silent Voices*, New York, OUP, 1989, p. 255.
[47] See G. WILSON KNIGHT, "Thoughts on *The Waste Land*", *Denver Quarterly*, 7 (2), 1972, p. 3.

ticularly meaningful: the elimination of the poem "The Death of Saint Narcissus" in the American edition's proofs of *Ara Vos Prec* (*Poems*, 1920), and the dismissal of "The Love Song of St Sebastian", written in 1914, intended to be included in *Descent from the Cross* but only published posthumously in *Inventions of the March Hare* in 1996.

"The Love Song of St Sebastian" is an obsessive, sadomasochistic dramatic monologue in which the martyr Sebastian narrates the fantasy of his self-flagellation in the presence of his lover before strangling her. Eliot himself acknowleged the morbid quality of the poem in a letter to Conrad Aiken dated 25 July 1914, where he wrote: "Do you think that the Love Song of Saint Sebastian part is morbid, or forced?".[48] Probably the poem was composed shortly before the outbreak of World War I, and the mixture of war anxiety, bathhouse atmosphere (as it was said) and mythology is perfectly symptomatic of the situation. Nonetheless, it is quite surprising to see St Sebastian untraditionally portrayed as engaged in a sadomasochistic deadly moment *with a lady*, dying on a woman's breast: a sort of act *manqué* which is perhaps more suspect than any explicit homosexual representation. Eliot himself tried to negotiate this image in a letter to Aiken: "I have studied S. Sebastians – why would anyone paint a beautiful youth and stick him full of pins (or arrows) unless he felt a little as the hero of my verse? Only there's nothing homosexual about this".[49] On this point, Colleen Lamos – an appealing source for those wishing to know all possible references to homosexuality in *The Waste Land*[50] – also believes that Eliot's denial about these aspects in his works (like the suppression of Whitman's influence) was homophobically motivated.[51] Harold Bloom even insinuated that "Eliot's true and always unnamed precursor was […] an uneasy composite of Whitman and Tennyson".[52]

Let us consider now "The Death of Saint Narcissus", a poem recounting

> the story of a man who with the sensual self-absorption of Ovid's Narcissus reenacts several 'saintly' deeds: St Augustine's rejection of Carthage, St Sebastian's legendary martyrdom at the hands of archers, and the second-century St Narcissus' seclusion in the desert. The poem begins with a challenge to us, the readers, to differ from the Ovidian Narcissus by examining something other than our own shadows; we are invited to inspect the mangled body of the sacrificed 'saint'.[53]

It is a poem imbued with sensuality, through the discovery of new forms of body up to the final, masochistic transformations, when Narcissus enters the human world by taking the shape of a young girl raped in the woods by a drunken old man,[54] and then the divine world "by sacrificing himself to God in a climactic dance, after which he

[48] L. BELLOUR, "Eroticism versus Mysticism in T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of St Sebastian' and 'Death of St Narcissus'", *Yeats Eliot Review*, 30 (3-4), 2013, p. 3.

[49] Letter 58, quoted in C. LAMOS, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*, Cambridge, CUP, 1998, p. 83.

[50] Such as the readings of Fresca in her bath present in the drafts.

[51] See C. LAMOS, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust*, p. 34.

[52] H. BLOOM, *The Breaking of the Vessels*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 21.

[53] V. MAHAFFEY, "'The Death of Saint Narcissus' and 'Ode': Two Suppressed Poems by T.S. Eliot", *American Literature*, 50 (4), 1979, p. 607.

[54] A situation which Eliot later recreated more guardedly in "Dans le Restaurant".

at long last achieved 'satisfaction' through the love of his flesh for the 'penetrant arrows'".[55] Mahaffey continues affirming that in this "frenzied death-wish of a tortured, sexually androgynous and narcissistic man – his desire for release, self-extinction, climax, salvation and apotheosis", there are no traces of Eliot's characteristic irony, no intellectual response to the story of the saint.[56] Those rocks, the ones where Narcissus undergoes his metamorphosis, will be found in *The Waste Land* too, but in a totally different mood and style. Behind the self-censorship of the author in these early poems there is clearly the preference for an intellectual approach to his own experience. We also know that Pound had reservations about the acceptability of the early version of "Narcissus" from a letter of 2 February 1915; but "once incorporated into *The Waste Land* manuscript, transmuted into a disembodied desert voice and a handful of dust, Pound granted the Narcissus fragment silent approval".[57]

It is well known that the Pound-Eliot sodality aimed at reaching that detached, universalistic and ironic attitude that was to mark *The Waste Land*. An attitude of self-conscious disengagement from the Decadent movement, which, nonetheless, persisted in some of the connotations and imagery of later works. At the same time, the product of such a purge is part of a more generalised reticence connoting the male writing of the time as an adaptation to what can be called the 'hyper-masculine' ideal of Victorian-Edwardian England, partly due to the rising power of women and their socioeconomic independence. Query reads the entire *Waste Land* "as a representation of an embattled masculine consciousness drawn to the homoerotic but uncomfortable with changing 20th century sexual mores":

> Referring alternately to its hesitancy, ambiguity, homoeroticism, or even misogyny, readers have found it difficult to satisfactorily address the questions raised by the ambivalent sexuality and gender inversions the work presents. Several passages, including but not limited to key moments of *The Waste Land* and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, suggest at once an intensity of male-male relations and a dispassion – indeed at times a revulsion – toward male-female relations.[58]

Biographers have long gone in search of Eliot's 'true' sexual preferences, his allegedly repressed homosexuality, or misogyny, or similar tendencies. Needless to say, Eliot's 'actual' possible queerness is of no real interest here – as is often the case, one could virtually write from the perspective of any sexual identity without experiencing it themselves. What is really interesting is how the Decadent 'bathhouse' imagery and sentimentality were assumed by an author who seemed to despise both; if irony is one of the devices adopted to filter them, we might still find somewhere "a vehicle for the expression of a homoerotic impulse"[59] or, at least, its aesthetisation.

[55] V. MAHAFFEY, "'The Death of Saint Narcissus' and 'Ode': Two Suppressed Poems by T.S. Eliot", p. 608.
[56] *Ibidem*.
[57] *Ibidem*, pp. 608-609.
[58] P. QUERY, "'They Called Me the Hyacinth Girl': T.S. Eliot and the Revision of Masculinity", p. 4.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 17.

5. *Last Year's Hyacinths:* The Waste Land *and the Flowers of the Dead*

"Do you remember/ 'Nothing?'", demands a voice in *The Waste Land*; in the manuscript edited by Pound there was a reply which was later cut from the final version: "I remember the hyacinth garden". Numerous meanings could be associated with the hyacinth in *The Waste Land*, although in the final version of the poem the flower is mentioned only once, in the following passage from "The Burial of the Dead":

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.
Frisch weht der Wind
Der Heimat zu
Mein Irisch Kind,
Wo weilest du?
'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
—Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Oed' und leer das Meer.[60]

Mentioned soon after a quotation from Richard Wagner's highy evocative opera *Tristan und Isolde*, hyacinths are connected with a vague past, a (female) gender, a (specific) garden, hands full and wet hair, but also with a limbo between life and death, with the impossibility to speak, see, and understand, a heart of light crystallised in silence,[61] the necessary silence after a possible intimacy in a (symbolic?) Hyacinth garden. A Wagnerian quotation, again, closes the short episode as if in a frame. It all sounds as a recollection of something pleasant and painful, mixing "memories and desire". Reading it along these lines, after what we have pointed out so far, the passage might well seem a drier, more hermetic version of some Uranian verse.

In a poem where any act of intimacy between men and women is presented with detachment and disgust, the silence that envelops this sad, nostalgic recollection is particularly significant. In lines 35-37, hyacinths appear in two variants, related to a (male) "Hyacinth garden", with a capital letter as if recalling the name of the mythological figure, and to a (female) "hyacinth girl". In his Notes to the poem, Eliot foregrounded a connection between this episode and the context of the lady and the paralysed husband in "A Game of Chess", with further analogies with the metamorphosis motif

[60] T.S. ELIOT, "The Burial of the Dead", ll. 27-42, in ID., *The Waste Land*, London, Norton Critical Edition, (1922) 2000.

[61] Noticeably, as Sibyl, the mythological Hyacinth was also a lover of Apollo, the god of sun and light, truth and prophecy, among other things. Often interpreted as an intertextual echo of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the reference to the "heart of light" might also be associated with Evadne's love for Apollo and, if linked to silence, with the city of London and its Dantean slothful crowds.

in *The Tempest*: "Those are pearls that were his eyes" (I.ii.476).[62] In addition to this, Marianne Thormählen has drawn an interesting parallel with "the hyacinth girls" in August Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* (1908).[63] Moreover, considering that lines 26-29 of *The Waste Land* coincide with lines 1-5 of the poem "The Death of Saint Narcissus", there might have been an influence by Nikolai Tcherepnin's ballet *Narcisse et Echo* (1911), with Vaslav Nijinsky playing Narcisse and Léon Bakst's scenography. Indeed, Bakst's image of the nymph Echo dressed in a purple tunic became famous at the time and was known in artistic circles as "a hyacinth girl".[64]

In their article "Lilacs and Hyacinths: Two Symbols of Sadness in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*", Mariwan N.H. Barzinji and Ol'ga M. Ushakova analyse the symbolic correspondences between the two specimens in the poem, underlining how the degree of symbolisation and functions of flower imagery changes throughout the text:

> In his early poetry flowers can be presented as an element of ekphrastic description ([the] nasturtium in "Suppressed Complex", 1915) or a direct correspondence (objective correlative) for a certain emotional mood (a dead geranium in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night", 1917). In *The Waste Land* Eliot employs multidimensional palimpsestic symbolic images with a complex system of allusive references and cultural codes.[65]

The mythological roots of hyacinths connect them to an ancient vegetation deity of death and resurrection, in whose honour the Hyacinthia Holidays were celebrated in spring. In the tenth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Hyacinth is an 'April' deity of resurrection – a trait that perfectly fits the mythical method of *The Waste Land*: "In this context, the 'hyacinth garden' and the 'hyacinth girl' can be identified with the spring 'gardens of Adonis' and 'the daughters' of Hyacinth. Also, Hyacinthus is a type of hanged God".[66] This frame further projects the use of the flower into the broader context of the anthropological studies by J.G. Frazer and Jessie Weston. According to Northrop Frye, the hyacinth is also associated with the god's blood,[67] which allows us to emphasise the connotation of frustrated desire and grief at the loss of the beloved underlying the passage in *The Waste Land*.[68] It is a matter of fact that flowers are intertwined with death in the poem: they are flowers growing from the dead land, from the stony rubbish, from a lost innocence and a lost garden; they are poisonous and may kill, like the *belladonna*; they can sprout from corpses in your neighbour's garden. Hyacinths are used as a paradigmatic reminder for a lost lover; as symbols of a hidden love filled with sadness; and as an allegory for all the innocent youths that died on the front line. Moreover, they are flowers culturally and literarily associated with homosexuality

[62] See T.S. ELIOT, *The Waste Land*, Note to line 126.

[63] "The points of contact between Eliot's and Strindberg's hyacinth girls are so striking that it is difficult to shake them off as being coincidental" (M. THORMÄHLEN, The Waste Land. *A Fragmentary Wholeness*, Lund, CWK Gleerup, 1978, p. 144).

[64] M. NASRADEEN HASAN BARZINJI and O. MIKHAILOVNA USHAKOVA, "Lilacs and Hyacinths: Two Symbols of Sadness in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*", *Philological Class*, 25 (3), 2020, p. 177.

[65] *Ibidem*, p. 174.

[66] *Ibidem*, pp. 175-76.

[67] See N. FRYE, *T.S. Eliot*, Edinburgh and London, Oliver and Boyd, 1963, pp. 65-66.

[68] See M. THORMÄHLEN, The Waste Land. *A Fragmentary Wholeness*, p. 144.

and, therefore, sterility, like Mr Eugenides's currants. This, too, is Uranian.

The possible influence of all these sources on Eliot's poetry is a matter of debate. At the same time, limiting or circumscribing them too much would certainly be wrong. On the whole, I believe that Uranian poetry played an important role in Eliot's production, directly or indirectly through other forms of art and cultural references, whether consciously or not. In spite of the difficulties in discerning a borderline, one can say for sure that Eliot's ironic, mythical method was not totally immune to the disowned Romantic sentimentality and 'hideous' Decadence: as is often the case, the process of *inventio* is never pure, nor is it totally innocent. After all, memory always implies desire as well.

More to the point, there are two poems that, in terms of images and spirit, seem to preannounce the hyacinth passage of *The Waste Land*. They are two consecutive poems, "A Garden in Donnington" and "A Narcissus", by Gascoigne Mackie – a minor Uranian poet only loosely connected with the tight-knit group – included in the book titled *Charmides; or, "Oxford Twenty Years Ago"* (1898), in which he retrospectively celebrates his university days:

Do you remember that wild tangled garden
Where once we lingered both of us together
An early summer afternoon alone?
The house that long had stood untenanted
Echo'd and echo'd to your mirthful laugh,
[…] As boys will do,
We talked in careless accents about death,
Of what the hidden years might have in store
For both of us, and of the hopes we shared:
At last descending, touched by boyish whim,
Or charged with sudden prescience of thy doom,
Thou didst stoop down and pick a white narcissus:
Half-sad, half-playful, – adding words like these –

'Receive this flower, and keep it for my sake:
And if hereafter you should change beyond
My recognition: when we meet again
Show me the blossom; so shall I remember
This token of our comradeship and you.'
And then amid the swaying orchard grass,
His cheek irradiate with the rosy glow
Of sunset, to the hum of quivering gnat:
Continued: – 'And if aught should come between
To blur our friendship; or if untimely death
Should steal you from me while I yet survive:
Wait patiently for me beyond the river,
And as I pass, pick me a white narcissus,
So shall we know each other and rejoyce.'
And, when at last we rose, the trees were dark,
And ghost-moths fluttered in the orchard grass.[69]

[69] G. MACKIE, *Charmides; or, "Oxford Twenty Years Ago"*, Oxford, B.H. Blackwell, 1898, pp. 33-34.

It is undeniable that this excerpt may sound like a prequel to the hyacinth-girl episode in Eliot's poem. It is, however, highly improbable that Eliot knew it, as Mackie was a minor poet from Hampshire, where he also took holy orders and lived as a curate. Nonetheless, the incredible resemblance appears even more evident if we assume that the imagery was shared by both: an imagery made of hyacinths as well as (premature) death.[70]

Within a critical framework that resets, questions, and overthrows the Victorian-Modernist divide, it is now time to approach Modernist poetry, together with the literary construction of gender, by taking into account Uranian poetry and investigating its influence on early twentieth-century literature, which subjected it to a process of deconstruction and reformulation. The adoption of new critical lenses (such as Quantitative Criticism and Queer Studies) can reveal these hidden niches, in the attempt to uncover a significant part of the tradition that Eliot and his contemporaries tried to obfuscate.

The Uranian poet often "sought a visibility through which he could remain unseen".[71] That is why Uranian poetry is generally stereotyped, full of clichés, recognisable feelings and imagery: a poetry characterised by poverty of the verse but uniqueness of the theme. As a Modernist and *avant-garde* poet, Eliot smashed well-consolidated myths and symbols, including such out-of-fashion ones as the language of flowers, and conveyed his message by way of broken pieces, broken lines, or a juxtaposition of fragments. In this sense, hyacinths and narcissi may be seen as incorporating both Victorian prudishness and twentieth-century guilt. "If each flower cannot tell, at least each knows", wrote Raffalovich. Silence seems then to play, again and again, a resounding echo throughout literary history: not with a bang but a whimper.

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[70] Interestingly, in the 1912 version of the book, titled *Charmides and Other Poems Chiefly Relating to Oxford*, there are numerous significant changes, such as the substitution of 'narcissus' with 'the star of flowers' and of 'untimely death' with 'untimely change', and the complete disappearance of the word 'comradeship' from the book.

[71] E. JACKSON JR, *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation*, Bloomington, Indiana U.P., 1995, p. 51.

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