











space of tender closeness where the self could find refuge and protection from distress and regain its true essence – therefore, the invitation is direct and unequivocal: ‘Come, take your flowers’ (Shakespeare 1120).

The invitation is echoed indirectly in the traditional song of the gypsy sellers of lavender on the streets of London [27]. Their unmistakable cry is essentially addressed to the senses, proposing a vision of subtle sophistication – a revised version of sensuality captured in alternating lines consisting of eight and nine syllables:

*“Won’t you buy my sweet blooming lavender,  
Sixteen branches one penny,  
Ladies fair make no delay,  
I have your lavender fresh today...”* (1-4)

The incantation is destined exclusively to a female audience seems to forge a semantic of unrepressed energy: the only reaction response would be a submission to the senses and to promote a hedonistic philosophy of life enjoyment. The metric variations seem to encode different strategies of seduction and continuity, dominated by a basic capitalist doublet: otium/negotium, insidiously involving the negotiated relationship in which eventually one has to give in, for

*“Buy it once, you’ll buy it twice,  
It makes your clothes smell sweet and nice.  
It will scent your pocket handkerchiefs,  
Sixteen branches for one penny...”* (5-8)

There is a slightly dual symbolism of the flowers: innocent beauty, purity and spiritual devotion and seductive feminine beauty, passion and sexual power. Paradoxically, the ‘sweet and nice’ lavender seems even more attractive in the combinations of decency and sin, virtue and impurity, simplicity and refinement.

Perhaps that is what prompted the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé to detect a malevolent significance in the delicate flowers [14]. To the symbolist poet, the bouquet of wild flowers turns into a devilish gift of deceived affections, quite similar to the as declared in ‘The Seller of Scented Herbs’ (not coincidentally published as one of his ‘Cheap Songs’):

*“Your strawy lavender so blue,  
never believe that with those bold  
eyelashes it may be sold*

*to me...”* (Mallarmé 1-4)

The music of the metric patterns (hepta- and octosyllables), doubled by the mirror symmetry of the arch-rhyme alternating with cross-rhyme, points unequivocally to a blunt strategy of seduction, unrestricted by any sense of guilt or shame. As the explicit image of the ‘bold eyelashes’ alludes to a promise of erotic entertainment, the protagonist meditates on the dual power of the perfumed flowers, commonly related to order, cleanliness and restraint, consistent with the norms and laws of tradition:

*“...as to a hypocrite who  
would use it as a tapestry  
in places most convenient  
so that the mocking bowels may be  
reborn to true blue sentiment”* (Mallarmé 4-8)

Ironically, the mentioning of the ‘mocking bowels’ suspends the conservatism suggested by the ‘true blue sentiment’, liberating the wild streak of human nature. And thus the virtuous becomes vicious, guided by self-indulgence to a world of certainties rather than possibilities:

*“Better to set it among these  
masses of overwhelming hair  
and let the clean wisp perfume there...”*  
(Mallarmé 9-11)

Mallarmé’s sanguine song of illicit passion appears unique in the creative imagination of the world’s poets for the general public perception of *Lavandula Angustifolia* is positive, as proven by the lavender sellers’ subtle song which was further refined by Caryl James Battersby [28].

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the lyricist proposed a more elaborated version of the nomadic lines, developed by the English musician Edward German into a popular tune known as ‘Who’ll buy my lavender?’. The direct address to the ‘ladies fair’ remains but the reference to the herbaceous plant occasion yet another doublet: individual/collective, as the personal turns into an ode to national pride:

*“Ladies fair, I bring to you  
Lavender with spikes of blue;  
Sweeter plant was never found  
Growing in our English ground.  
Who’ll buy my lavender?”* (1-5)

The generosity of the flowers renowned for their refreshing effect prompts the desire to extend personal borders to the outside and

participate in the collective history of the nation. It is, at the same time, an appeal to transcend personal drives and commit oneself to high ideals of communion, for the seclusion of the domestic space seems to be enlivened by a glimpse of nature brought behind the walls:

*“Lavender shall turn your rooms  
Into gardens full of blooms;  
You shall almost hear the bees  
Humming drowsy melodies.  
Who’ll buy? Who’ll buy? Who’ll buy?  
Who’ll buy my lavender sweet?  
Who’ll buy?”* (6-12)

The obsessive refrain attempts to create and manipulate an invisible, and yet perceivable, audience: the specific female subjectivity, naturally characterised by tender and protective care-taking. The atmosphere of peaceful home is captured in domestic rituals in which lavender plays its well-established part which dissolves into a tinge of humour:

*“Velvet gown and dainty fur  
Should be laid in lavender,  
For its sweetness drives away  
Fretting moths of silver grey.  
Who’ll buy my lavender?”* (13-17)

Escaping desacralization by the curt reference to trivial things that compose ordinary existence, lavender stays true to its destiny and contributes to creating a living space of balance, harmony and comfort – the place that the English anthropologist Kate Fox noted to highlight ‘the quiet, unrestrained aspects of Englishness’, among which the typical ‘predilection for moderation, for domesticity, for the comfortingly tame and familiar’ (K. Fox, 2004) [10].

The conclusion arises naturally: the sweet-scented plant is a challenge to permanence. The silent flowers seem to transfer their delicateness and subtleness to their human counterpart, both united in their struggle to escape the implacable passing of time:

*“Ladies fair, I pray that ye  
Like the lavender may be,  
And your fame when you are gone,  
Still in sweetness linger on.  
Who’ll buy? Who’ll buy? Who’ll buy?  
Who’ll buy my lavender, my sweet lavender?”* (18-23)

William Shenstone explored the same attempt to capture a glimpse of eternity in his 1748 poem, ‘The School-Mistress’ whose lines describe the simplicity and purity of a Shakespeare-resembling collection of aromatic plants [23].

The teacher appears not only as the genuine holder of knowledge and wisdom, but also as the creator of a fantasy green land, in a desire to achieve harmony between the self and the natural surroundings. The private space articulates a story of consensus between the material, the actual botanical characteristics of the garden plants, and the spiritual, their reflection in the character traits of the private person.

For, in the tenderly cared-for garden, ‘tufted Basil’, ‘pun-provoking Tyme’, ‘Marygold of cheerful hue, ‘the lowly Gill, that never dares to climb’, ‘pungent Radish’, ‘Marjoram sweet’ and ‘trim Rosmarine’ compete in creating a feeling of commonsense and tranquility that gives the measure of the pure insular self. And *Lavandula’s* bluish spikes arise between all these to complete the image of the personal ‘sacred shelter’, ‘the dantiest garden of the proudest peer’:

*“Shall be, ere-while, in arid bundles bound  
To lurk admist the labours of her loom,  
And crown her kerchiefs with mickle rare  
perfume”* (Shenstone 105-108)

The simple presence of the lavender flowers is sufficient to recapture the essence and power of home, the individual place of concrete attachment to time and space. With numerous contemporary women poets, the dwelling place is the mythical place where the self regains its strength and from where affections spring, the place whose quietude and familiarity always secure comfort and plenitude. And lavender is summoned to bring its contribution to self-relocation within a mundane universe.

Myra Schneider provides such an example in *Writing My Way Through Cancer* (2003), an account of her traumatic experience of mastectomy, from diagnosis and surgery to chemotherapy and radiotherapy and, finally, to the early stages of recovery [21]. Each phase of illness becomes the source of profound spiritual transformation as the impaired corporeality gains an almost divinely comforting resonance

through the agency of the lavender scent sprinkled in the bath water:

*"The water was warm, softening my back..., all the tension in my muscles melting like a miracle, the sense of cleansing, the lavender of the bath essence filling my nostrils, an overwhelming sense of release, a blessing – surely a poem there? [...] Money couldn't buy such a gift"* (Schneider 32).

The delicate suggestion of typically British rural life makes the direct connection with the life-giving earth and its secrets of divine creation. Individual reintegration into the natural life cycle unchains creativity and the self becomes able to achieve the state of simplicity so as to get in touch with long-ignored elementary feelings, as the anticipated poem turns to form:

*"... this pool of bliss can no more be explained than the song that pours from a lark as it disappears into stitchless blue, the seed circles that cram a sunflower calyx, day splashing crimsons and apricot golds across the sky before it sleeps into the silence of night, the way love fountains"* (Schneider 58:22-30)

Vulnerability is slowly overcome as the self strives to regain vitality from the force of the comforting flowers that confront the bodily desert with a pledge of good health, which helps the self resolve its intimate drama superbly by similitude with the empowering metaphor of the Amazon – the brave one-breasted female exulting in profusion and stamina.

The same attempt of the anguished spirit to recapture its quintessence amidst natural world, thus regaining concordance with both the outside and the inside, is displayed by another contemporary English poet, Isobel Dixon [6]. In 'After Grief', her fictionalized self makes use of the fragrant lavender flowers to relieve the mental gloom generated by her father's death:

*"Three drops of lavender in this water is not balm enough. (Dixon 1-2)*  
[...]

*But I shall have it, scent and life.  
I will not bathe in only salt and blood"* (Dixon 5-6)

Although the ritual recollecting the Gerardian 'swimming of the braine' (R. Binney, 2006) [3] is acknowledged as insufficient for the instantaneous alleviation of grief, there is still comfort at the thought of temporary suspension, accomplished with the help of the natural agent – a profound and individual way of entering the world and gaining strength from it. A union between the subject and the world seems to be achieved, and this union is shown in an intensely empathetic language.

Romanian poetry also includes the rich imagery of *Lavandula Angustifolia* to create comforting images of delicate affections and plenary emotions. In 'Randuri pentru Mi-Tzu-Ko' ('Lines for Mi-Tzu-Ko'), the symbolist poet Ion Minulescu assigns a new meaning to the strongly fragrant herb which subtly turns into an aphrodisiac: its velvety flowers and sweet perfume propose an exercise in imagination by mentally substituting the exotic female body [15]. The tiny space of personal intimacy appears blessed by the joy of a mutually-shared first love:

*"In my room – happy*

*White*

*Small*

*Room*

*Bearing a lavender scent –*

*We bend our arms*

*Like four sunrays..."* (Minulescu 3-9)

The tranquility of the individual area identified by the familiar perfume nurtures an impossible leave-taking. The present annuls the attempted rupture in favour of rapture as ecstatic delight is reiterated by the recurrent reference to the enclosed space where the two identities merge with each other in instantaneous disidentification and reidentification:

*"Mi-Tzu-Ko, can you not guess*

*That in my small room*

*Bearing a lavender scent*

*What you were yesterday*

*No longer you are today?"* (Minulescu 26-30)

The repeated reference to the sunny room sounds like an incantation that creates a balanced communion in which the self become the perfect complement to the other. Even if transient, happiness is impossible to measure, either materially or mentally, as it belongs to



natural, incomprehensible laws, accentuated by the two lovers' unrestricted communion:

*"Can you not see that God  
Has sent us a rainbow  
So that our new being –  
Divided until yesterday –  
Can become one in the sun (Minulescu 31-35)*

[...]

*As though my happy*

*White*

*Small*

*Room*

*Bearing a lavender scent –*

*Would be still your room as well?" (Minulescu 40-45)*

A few decades later, Tudor Arghezi voices the same intense abandonment in 'Morgenstimmung' [2]. Touched by the flamboyance and ardour of a song whose imagination assigns fatal passion, the poet celebrates love arising from high appreciation and reverential wonder:

*"You slipped your song into myself*

*One afternoon, when*

*The safely locked-up window of my soul*

*Was opened in the wind*

*And I was unaware that I heard your song"*  
(Arghezi 1-5)

The mysterious song allows oblique confessions of the self that simultaneously discovers itself by externalizing to the other:

*"Your song was filling the whole building,*

*The drawers, boxes, and the carpets, too,*

*As sonorous lavender. Look,*

*All my bolts had broken loose*

*And my monastery was left unlocked"* (Arghezi 6-10)

The harmonious tune dissolves the entire system of the fortuitous listener who turns into a dramatic recipient of a great change translated as present incompleteness. At the same time, it is a challenge to fill in the empty space by restoring the balance of his personal microcosm by raising metaphysical questions and dilemmas destined to find the concealed meaning of an apparently ordinary occurrence: *"Why did you play? Why did I hear you?"* (Arghezi 21)

[...]

*I was coming from above, you were coming from below.*

*You were coming from the living, I was coming from the dead"* (Arghezi 24-25)

As seen from above, in the realm of literature, particularly in poetry, lavender generates highly personal sensual and sensuous responses. The extent of the ultimately subjective reactions depend upon the dimension and nature of the individual character, ranging from refined sensorial perception activating a special form of intellectualism to sheer sexuality following the normal course of instincts.

## CONCLUSIONS

Whenever someone says the word 'lavender', their thoughts certainly fly towards fields varying from blue to purple – always a gratifying encounter since the colour and scent of the narrow-leaved aromatic herb stimulate the sense of beauty and measure springing from both its curative and spiritual qualities.

An old metaphor of strong affections and subtle seductiveness, *Lavandula Angustifolia* blends the magic of nature with simple facts of life in an ambiguous fusion of strength and fragility, sensuality and ingenuity, sophistication and simplicity. As medicine, perfume or cosmetics, the healing and aesthetic qualities of the lavender types promote the need to return to an unspoiled natural identity connected with, and committed to, the environment and thus to recreate a utopian Golden Age governed by 'peace, decency and order' (T. Gifford, 1995) [11].

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