

SPIKES OF AZURE BLOOM: LAVENDER – HISTORY... AND STORIES

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Abstract

Lavender has often drawn considerable attention both scientifically and artistically. The Mediterranean aromatic plant was known and used since ancient times, as mentioned by Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder, without making any difference between the species. Later on, Hildegarde von Bingen dedicated an entire chapter to lavender in her work "Materia Medica", distinguishing between *Lavandula vera* and *Lavandula spica* for the first time in history. Scientific interest was manifest further on over the centuries until our modern times, as proven by the numerous botany treatises which provide detailed descriptions of the strongly scented plant, highly appreciated in the industry of perfumes, cosmetics and aromatherapy, particularly for its relaxing effect. The numerous varieties are also pleasant to the eye, and their presence in the garden creates full harmony with its delicate beauty, connecting human essence with natural landscape. The pale purple flowers are equally well represented in literature. From William Shakespeare and Stephane Mallarmé to the Romanians Ion Minulescu and Tudor Arghezi, the old metaphor of strong affections and subtle seductiveness blends the magic of nature with simple facts of life. The emotional atmosphere of the meditative stories forges a deep philosophy aiming to recover the self's authenticity and commonsense.

Key words: aromatic plant, *Lavandula angustifolia*, perfume, purple, symbol.

INTRODUCTION

The area of origin for the *Lavandula* species is southern Europe, most specifically the western Mediterranean basin, extending from East to the Dalmatian Coast and Greece (E. Păun, 1985) [17].



Photo 1. *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill. - Distribution in Europe

(Source:<http://luirig.altervista.org/flora/taxa/index1.php?scientific-name=lavandula+angustifolia>)

In countries like France, Italy, Spain, Greece, North Africa, lavender can be cultivated in fields and gardens, but it also grows spontaneously at altitudes between 700 and 1800m (*Lavandula angustifolia* Mill.). In the same area, *Lavandula latifolia* Vill. can be found at lower altitudes (400-700m) and lavande (*Lavandula hybrida* Reverchon) at altitudes of 600-800m (E. Coiciu and G. Racz, 1962) [4, 17].

The Romans are considered the first to spread this species to the North, to England, a country where lavender has now become a very important plant in any garden [26].

The largest lavender-cultivated areas are found in such countries as France, Bulgaria, Spain and the countries of former Yugoslavia [16].

The numerous varieties are pleasant to the senses, their presence in the natural or human-touched landscape appealing to the eye, touch and smell simultaneously. The feelings of tenderness and sophistication created by the pale purple flowers and their mysterious scent are often remembered in literature, particularly in poetry, as will be seen later from some of the finest examples of universal verse.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The present paper is primarily based on data collected from scientific literature (among which the invaluable treatises on aromatic and medicinal plants authored by Evdochia Coiciu and Gabriel Rácz, Florentin Crăciun, Ovidiu Bojor and Mircea Alexan, Aurel Ardelean and Gheorghe Mohan and the excellent studies on lavender by Tessa Evelegh, Helen Farmer-Knowles and Maria Lis-Balchin), completed with the excellent studies by the anthropologist Kate Fox, botanist, zoologist and physiologist Ruth Binney, and literary critic Terry Gifford, as well as several representative extracts from poetical writings of internationally renowned persons of letters (William Shakespeare and Stephane Mallarmé), contemporary British poets (Myra Schneider and Isobel Dixon), and prominent Romanian artists (Ion Minulescu and Tudor Arghezi).

Our research approach is mainly descriptive in its scientific section and interpretive in the literary one, aiming to bring solid evidence and argue in favour of the undeniable botanic and aesthetic qualities of the herbaceous plant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

History

The name of the genus *Lavandula* L. comes from the Latin word *lavare* – to wash, as the Romans used the plant to perfume their bath water and also for therapeutic purposes (I. Grințescu, 1961) [16,17].

The earliest writings mentioning lavender belong to the Greek scholar Theophrastus (370-285 BC), Tim Upson [14]. The plant became an important medicinal species around 77 AD [26] when the Greek physician, pharmacologist and botanist Pedanius Dioscorides (40-90 AD) noted its presence in the Stoechades islands on the Gallic coast. Dioscorides described the laxative and refreshing characteristics of lavender (S. Festing, 1989) [13].

The Roman physician, surgeon and philosopher Galen (129-199 AD) listed lavender among the antidotes used against poisoning and insect bites [13].

Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) made the distinction between *Lavandula stoechas* and

Lavandula vera (today known as *Lavandula angustifolia*). In his writings, the Roman naturalist and philosopher advocated the use of lavender to treat sadness and other illnesses [12].

The Arab physician Avicenna (980-1037) showed that “lavender essence acts as a strong narcotic: used sensibly, it decreases sensitivity, slows reflexes and removes pain”, E. Favre, 2005 [9].

The first reference of the species *Lavandula angustifolia* belongs to the German polymath Hildegarde von Bingen (1098-1179). In her “Materia Medica”, she dedicated an entire chapter to this species, “On *Lavandula*”, in which she rendered the differences between *Lavandula (vera) angustifolia* and *L. spica*. (Flückiger and Hanbury, 1885, Throop, 1994) quoted by Jo Castle and Maria Lis-Balchin [13], E. Păun, 1988 [17].

Hildegarde wrote that the Romans used lavender oil to remove lice; the method was still in use in Provence in 1874 [7].

In 1837, at the court of Charles VI, the King of France, pillows were filled with lavender, both for fragrance and in the hope of removing insects [12].

Lavender oil was obtained for the first time in the 16th century (H.P. Dörfler și G. Roselt, 1984) [16].

In the 16th and 17th centuries, lavender became widely known as a medicinal species, being used to treat various illnesses and diseases.

In the 19th century, lavender was included in the “London Pharmacopeia” as an ingredient used for various treatments [7].

E. Păun, 1988, wrote that lavender began to be cultivated after World War I; before that time, countries such as France, Italy, Spain used spontaneously grown lavender for the extraction of volatile oil [17].

The plant has been mentioned as a melliferous species since the 1950s. Thus, Gluhov, 1955, placed lavender among the species that provide very fine honey while Radoev, 1955, showed that the honey production obtained from a hectare of lavender could vary between 116 and 128 kg [4].

The results of the research carried out by E.C. Barbier, 1956, indicated that the lavender plants

visited by bees produced a higher amount of volatile oil than the isolated plants [4].

Systematics and description

Lundmark wrote the first monograph of the genus *Lavandula* in 1780. "De Lavandula" mentioned the existence of five species and eight varieties. Later on, in 1826, François de Gingins, Baron of Sarraz, published a second monograph of the genus, in which he described 12 species in terms of morphology, geographic distribution, characteristics and uses. "A Taxonomic Study of the Genus *Lavandula*" (1936) was the third monograph dedicated to the genus by D.A. Chaytor. The book described 28 species and numerous varieties belonging to five sections [13].

In the subsequent years, several researchers displayed interest in the genus. Thus, in 1949 A. Rozeira revised the section *Stoechas*; in 1985, A.G. Miller noted the presence of the species *Lavandula* in Arabia and northeastern Africa; in 1986 and 1989, M. Suarez-Cervera and J.A. Seoane-Camba described five new species within the Iberian Peninsula [13].

The genus *Lavandula* L. includes species of long-lived subshrubs and perennial plants with full or pinnate fideate leaves. The flowers are grouped into spike-shaped inflorescences. The flower consists in: a cylindrical calyx tube with five lobes, the upper lobe presenting a broad appendice; a bilabiate corolla, blue or violet in colour, which includes the stamens; the ovary whose base presents a nectar disk with four lobes opposing the four ovoid nucules. The stigma lobes are flat, the receptacle is convex in shapes, and the seeds lack an endosperm [20].

Nowadays over 30 lavender species are known, including very many subspecies and varieties. Over the time, the genus *Lavandula* was divided into three sections: *Spica*, *Stoechas* and *Pterostoechas*. However, the genus has been recently classified into six sections: *Lavandula* (*Spica*), *Dentatae* *Stoechas*, *Pterostoechas*, *Subnudae* și *Chaetostachys* (Table 1) [13].

The most important species are: *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill., *Lavandula hybrida* Reverchon, *Lavandula latifolia* (L. F.) Medik. All belong to the section *Lavandula* and are known as True Lavender, Lavandin and Spike Lavander, respectively.

Table 1. Classification of sections

Section <i>Lavandula</i>	
1 – <i>L. angustifolia</i> Mill.	
2 – <i>L. lanata</i> Boiss.	
3 – <i>L. latifolia</i> Medik.	
Section <i>Dentatae</i>	
4 – <i>L. dentata</i> L.	
Section <i>Stoechas</i>	
5 – <i>L. stoechas</i> Ging.	
6 – <i>L. viridis</i> L'Hér.	
Section <i>Pterostoechas</i>	
7 – <i>L. multifida</i> L.	
8 – <i>L. canariensis</i> Mill.	
9 – <i>L. pinnata</i> L.f.	
10 – <i>L. buchii</i> Webb. and Berthel	
11 – <i>L. minutoli</i> Bolle	
12 – <i>L. rotundifolia</i> Benth.	
13 – <i>L. tenuisecta</i> Coss. ex. Ball	
14 – <i>L. marocanna</i> Murb.	
15 – <i>L. mairei</i> Humbert.	
16 – <i>L. antineae</i> Maire	
17 – <i>L. coronopifolia</i> Poir.	
18 – <i>L. pubescens</i> Decne.	
19 – <i>L. citriodora</i> A. G. Miller	
Section <i>Subnudae</i>	
20 – <i>L. subnuda</i> Benth.	
21 – <i>L. macro</i> Baker	
22 – <i>L. dhofarensis</i> A. G. Miller	
23 – <i>L. setifera</i> T. Anderson	
24 – <i>L. nimmoi</i> Benth.	
25 – <i>L. galgalloensis</i> A. G. Miller	
26 – <i>L. aristibracteata</i> A. G. Miller	
27 – <i>L. somaliensis</i> Chaytor	
Section <i>Chaetostachys</i>	
28 – <i>L. gibsonii</i> Grah.	
29 – <i>L. bipinnata</i> (Roth) Kuntze	
Unclassified taxa	
30 – <i>L. basikensis</i> A. G. Miller	
31 – <i>L. atriplicifolia</i> Benth.	
32 – <i>L. erythraea</i> (Chiov.) Cufud.	

In Romania, the following species can be found: *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill., *Lavandula hybrida* Reverchon [17].

Lavandula angustifolia Mill. = *Lavandula officinalis* Chaix et. Vill. = *Lavandula vera* D.C. – lavender, French lavender with several varieties, among which the most important are var. *delphinensis* ('petite' or 'fine lavande') and var. *fragrans* ('moyenne lavande'). This species produces high quality oil but requires better climate and soil conditions [16].

Commonly termed 'levăntică', the species also bears other popular names: 'aspic', 'levand', 'livant', 'spichinel'.

The genus *Lavandula* L. includes species of long-lived subshrubs and perennial plants (up to 20-30 years) shaped into globular bushes. The grey-green bushes can reach 30-70 and even up to 100 cm in height [5].

The root system is lignified and can reach 2 m in length.

The young stem is quadrangular and beset with very fine hairs; with age, it becomes lignified, the highly branched structures turn brown and bark exfoliates.

The oppositely disposed leaves are full or pinnate, linear, sharp-pointed, sessile, 2-5 cm in length and 3-5 mm in width (photo 2). The grey colour of the lower leaves results from the ramified hairs present on both sides; the upper leaves are grey-green in colour [5].

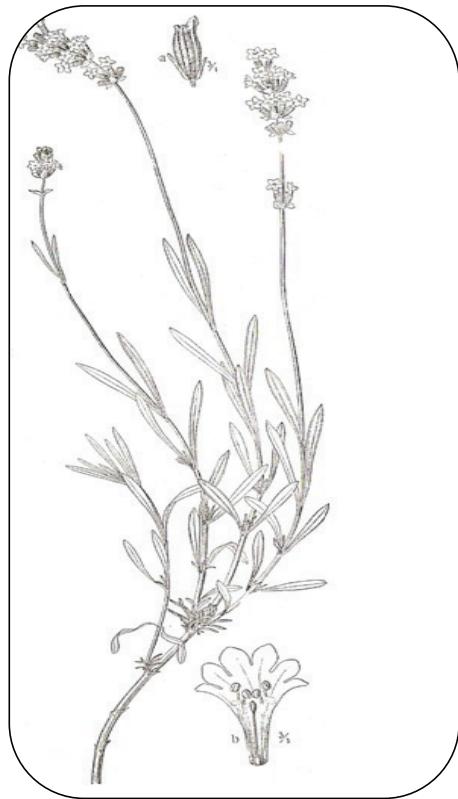


Photo 2. *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill. (a—calyx, b—corolla) (Source: Flora of the Popular Republic of Romania, 1961)

The flowers are grouped into spike-shaped inflorescences with 3-8 false verticils and 3-7 labiate, almost sessile, flowers.

The flower consists in: a cylindrical calyx tube with five lobes, the upper lobe presenting a broad appendice; a bilabiate corolla, blue or violet in colour, which includes the stamens (photo 3 and photo 4); the ovary whose base presents a nectar disk with four lobes opposing the four ovoid nucules [5].

As verticiles are disposed at the base, the inflorescence looks like a long spike (3-7 cm). The flowers have brown membranous oval bracts; the calyx is cylindrical, hairy and glandular; and the bilabiated membranous corolla has fine hairs.



Photo 3. *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill. - Flower before the petals emerge (Original)



Photo 4. *Lavandula angustifolia* Mill. - Calyx and corolla (Original)

The species generally flowers from June to August. Lavender has a fresh, floral scent as a top note and base note of green grass with a slightly bitter taste.

Lavender produces groups of four ovoid glossy brown nucules as fruit [5].

The flowers harvested from this species (*Lavandulae flos*, *Lavandulae angustifoliae flos*, *Flores spicae*) can be used both fresh and dried whereas the lavandin flowers can be used only fresh (*Lavandulae hibridae flos*) [16].

The content in volatile oil can vary between 0.7 and 1.4% in the fresh flowers, and can reach 11.3% in the dried ones [16].

Linalool (either free or esterified) is the main component of the volatile oil extracted from the lavender flowers. However, lavender oil

includes other alcohols (geraniol, nerol, lavandulol, borneol, citronellol, terpinen), free acids, phenols, aldehydes and ketones [16].

Lavender or Lavandin was brought from Bulgaria and was originally used only as ornamental and aromatic species in the gardens around Bucharest [16, 19].

Between 1949 and 1955 the first experiments were initiated in the species (1949 – Evdochia Coiciu tested plant material brought from Bulgaria and grown at Măgurele; 1950 – the first industrial lavender culture was established at Feldioara, 50 hectares of land being cultivated with plant material brought from the U.S.S.R.). After 1955, Tatiana Săvăeanu initiated research studies on the lavender population variability aiming at creating a local variety at Moara Domnească [4, 17].

In the 1970s and 1980s, industrial growth of lavender expanded. Thus, 420 ha were grown in the 1980s and the outlook for the Nineties included an increase of up to 3,000 ha.

In 1988, E. Păun indicated that lavender culture should be extended especially in southern and southeastern Romania [17].

Since lavender is not extremely demanding for special soil conditions, but requires good light and temperature, it can be used for erosion control and sand fixation purposes [17].

However, in the 1990s, Romanian agriculture underwent a period of fragmentation and reorganization. Consequently, the limitation of the grown areas and the decrease in the crop assortment affected the cultivation of medicinal and aromatic plants.

At present, lavender is grown in southern and southwestern Romania [16].

In Romania, the range of varieties included a Bulgarian variety (Karlovo) for a long period of time; between 1973 and 2006, it added a population known as “Of Moara Domnească” (in Romanian: “De Moara Domnească”). In 1992, researchers also homologated the Codreanca variety; certified as early, frost resistant and rich in volatile oil (1.40-1.48% in fresh flowers), this variety is still present in the Romanian Official Catalogue. The list was recently completed with two new varieties: Emilia (2010) and Hof 90 (2011) [25].

Apart from the scientific aspect, there are other elements that define the importance of

lavender: medicinal, for its carminative action in digestive disorders, its slightly antispasmodic effects or as local antiseptic; culinary, in various cake and biscuit recipes and for sugar flavouring; cosmetic, as perfume, soap and bath scent; aromatic, in various potpourri mixtures and scented sachets; decorative, in parks and gardens.

Last but not least, the cultural dimension of the herbaceous plant should not be overlooked for lavender has captured the imagination of many peoples all over the world.

Some stories

The scented flowers, said to have acquired their specific fragrance when the Virgin Mary spread the clothes of the infant Jesus on the bushes to dry, are equally well represented in literature.

Paradoxically, the typically Mediterranean herb has exerted particular fascination to England – a rural country *par excellence*, famous for its traditional lifestyle practices that preserve a ‘green’ sense of pleasure deriving from the natural world. No wonder that *Lavandula angustifolia* is also known as ‘English’ or ‘true’ lavender owing to its top qualities that recommend it as the most valuable of all lavender species.

Highly appreciated for its healing and spiritual value in the times of Queen Elizabeth I, the purple-flowered plant was used to soothe various ailments and protect against evil. Therefore, William Shakespeare could not overlook their distinctive perfume which he praised in ‘The Winter’s Tale’ (1623) [22].

In Act IV, Scene 4, gracious Perdita offers her father’s guests strongly perfumed flowers gathered together in what she believed an irresistible alchemy destined to pleasure the senses. Lavender interweaves its charm with other strongly-perfumed herbs, arising like an insignia of innocent femininity appealing to middle-aged men:

“... Here’s flowers for you;

Hot lavender, mints, savoury, marjoram;

The marigold, that goes to bed wi’ the sun...”
(Shakespeare 1120)

The maiden’s homage to the flowers ‘of middle summer’ creates an atmosphere of ingenuity and affluence that alludes to a utopian landscape. The garden turns into the intimate

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 19th 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 daintiest 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 re-create a utopian Golden Age governed by 'peace, decency and order' (T. Gifford, 1995) [11].

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