

Estranged Flowers: Plant Symbolism in Antonia Pozzi's and Krystyna Krahelska's poems

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Abstract

Having lived in the same historical period, but raised in different countries, the Italian poetess Antonia Pozzi and the Polish poetess Krystyna Krahelska share a similar view of nature. In their works, an important role is played by plant symbolism, which not only is influenced by literature, folklore, and mythology, but is also subject to personal reinterpretations of traditional and established meanings. This common point derives from them having similar literary education, from analogous experiences as young women writers (Pozzi committed suicide at the age of 26, Krahelska was killed during the Warsaw Uprising at the age of 31), and from a close, to some extent, poetical sensibility. The paper focuses mainly on the role played in their poems by plants as metaphors of the Self, as figurative images of blossoming life and ineluctable death, and as a language to describe erotic desire and unrequited love.

Keywords: plant symbolism, Antonia Pozzi, Krystyna Krahelska, mythology, folklore

Abstrakt

Żyjące w tym samym okresie historycznym, ale wychowywane w różnych krajach, włoska poetka Antonia Pozzi i polska Krystyna Kraheńska zdają się podzielić podobny pogląd na природę. W ich wierszach znaczącą rolę odgrywa symbolika roślin, która nie tylko ulega wpływom literatury, folkloru i mitologii, ale podlega także osobistym reinterpretacjom tradycyjnych i ustalonych znaczeń. Ów wspólny mianownik wynika z podobnego wychowania literackiego, ze zbliżonych doświadczeń jako młode pisarki (Pozzi popełniła samobójstwo w wieku 26 lat, Kraheńska została zabita podczas Powstania Warszawskiego w wieku 31 lat) oraz z bliskiej, pod pewnymi względami, wrażliwości poetyckiej. Artykuł skupia się głównie na roli roślin jako metafor jaźni, jako przenośnych obrazów kwitnącego życia i nieuchronnej śmierci oraz jako języka opisującego erotyczne pożądanie i nieodwzajemnioną miłość.

Słowa kluczowe: symbolika roślin, Antonia Pozzi, Krystyna Kraheńska, mitologia, folklor

“Every landscape is a state of the soul.”
Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1884, 55)¹

1. Introduction

Although raised in different cultural and geographical contexts, the Italian poetess Antonia Pozzi (1912–1938) and the Polish poetess Krystyna Kraheńska (1914–1944) seem to have had a similar literary education based on a combination of Romantic and Modernist poetry that left deep traces on their aesthetic sensibility, in their inventory of images, and their thematic cores.² Their common denominator lies in the shared concept of nature as *magistra vitae* (life’s teacher), maternal dispenser of primeval wisdom

¹ Unless otherwise indicated translations are my own.

² For further information, see also Kraheńska 1972; Grochowska and Grzymała-Siedlecki 1996; Borsa 1997; Bernabò 2012; Papi 2013.

empirically acquired through empathy, lived experience, intimate participation, corporal involvement, and abandonment as a mystical-like and ritual-like form of learning.

Two poetic compositions which were written in the same period show such commonality. In an untitled poem dated 1930, Krystyna Krahelska expresses her poetical credo based on an identification with the natural realm, a perception of the world as a synthesis of natural and human elements:

From the forest I learned to see,
From the wind I learned to sing
In my heart are autumn and wind (1978, 38)

Antonia Pozzi seems to echo these words in an untitled poem set in a crepuscular atmosphere infused with a feeling of pantheistic sacredness:

Abandoned in the arms of darkness
mountains
you teach me to wait:
at dawn – my forests
will churches become.
I'll burn – a candle on autumn flowers,
stunned in the sun (2015a, 443)

Forests, mountains, wind, autumn are means by which knowledge is matrilineally transmitted (assuming that the “symbolic mother” stands for nature). The perception of the world as a physical entity, provided with existential, metaphysical and sacred implications, takes the form of a “feminine” way to knowledge as an alternative to pure *logos* and rational observation. This approach emerges in Pozzi's *Tempo* (Time), which could be seen as a reinterpretation of the fairy-tale *The Sleeping Beauty in the Woods*, based on an interesting inversion of gender roles. Here the “sleeping beauty”, unaware of the surrounding world, is a man: “While you sleep / the seasons pass / on the mountain”. Only the female character is able to listen to nature and to penetrate its secrets: “I can gather lilies of the valley / while you sleep / as I know where they grow” (Pozzi 2015b, 75. See also Bernabò 2012, 245–246).

On a textual level, the importance of nature in the works of the two poetesses reveals itself in the images of the cyclical time as a sequence of birth, death and rebirth; of the

earth as a sympathetic and fertile, yet at the same time cruel and ruthless entity; of the soil both as a cradle and a grave, a place of origin and a point of arrival; of the vegetal realm as a symbol of “creation” (both in a biological and figurative meaning) and a surrogate of missed maternity. An important role is also played by the vertical conflict between chthonic forces (the tree roots that guarantee groundedness in the world) and the aspiration to spirituality (the branches that point to the sky). Furthermore, the landscape is often depicted as an objective correlative of feelings, moods, desires, and emotional states, while the flora acts as a metaphor of the body, once throbbing with life and ready to blossom, once withering and decaying. The naturalistic scenario is also a setting in which mythological and fabled fantasies take place.³

2. Flowers and plants as metaphors of the Self

One of the main strategies enacted in Pozzi’s and Krahelska’s poems consists of using a tree or a plant as a figurative imagining of the Self. An innate trait of a flower, for instance, its frailty or its ability to survive in a hostile environment, can express a particular mood, an existential condition, an attitude, a feeling, a mindset. Pozzi’s poetical imagery is dominated by gloomy sceneries in which anguished subjects perceive themselves as withered flowers, fallen logs or stepped-on leaves. In *Giorno dei morti* (Day of the Dead), the poetess portrays herself as a leafless tree in winter, where winter is a soul-season: “and I stay as a bare poplar / bearing / with gaunt arms / the whole weight of the skies” (Pozzi 2015a, 184), while in *Disperazione* (Desperation) she states: “I am a frozen flower / estranged / from any human pity or prayer” (Pozzi 2015a, 143). In *Via dei Cinquecento*, the poetess talks of “a hedge that groans in the wind” (Pozzi 2015b, 135), a concept reiterated in *Voce di donna* (Woman’s voice): “I’m the bare hedge to your garden / staying mute to flower / under convoys of gypsy stars” (Pozzi 2015b, 117). The self-contempt of a female subject unworthy of love and unable to joyfully live her life is conveyed by the images of flowers growing on the roadside or precariously clinging to a cliff, while existence flows away like a river in which she cannot bathe, a clear metaphor of alienation, as in *In riva alla vita* (On the banks of life):

³ For further information on related issues, see also Strazzeri 1994; Borsa 1997; Carle 1997; Bernabò 2012; Grochowska and Grzymala-Siedlecki 1996; Amenta 2016.

and I stand
 thinking of me tonight
 motionless on the banks of life
 like a tuft of rush
 that trembles
 as the water passes by. (Pozzi 2015a, 142)

The same image recurs in *Esclusi* (Exclusions): “curbed / beside the privets / I slowly turn / to useless / bush” (Pozzi 2002, 97), and achieves dramatical effects in *Sonno e risveglio sulla terra* (Sleep and waking on Earth), where the poetess talks to herself in such terms:

now it writhes
 bitter between brambles your frail
 will in life: and you're suddenly
 lily on a gorge's edge
 when fresh in the wind
 it uplifts you
 your red moorland. (Pozzi 2015b, 107)

As we can see, the poetess often depicts herself as a lonely, useless, motionless, faded or suffering plant. A similar approach can also be found in Krahelska's works, yet the anguish resonates here less tragically and more melancholically. In the untitled poem beginning with the verse *Jak ciężko iść daleką ulicą* (How hard it is to go down a far-off street), written after moving from her little hometown to Warsaw, where she felt disoriented and unsettled,⁴ the poetess states: “I am a stray leaf amongst grey walls” (Krahelska 1978, 37). The leaf wandering at the mercy of the wind is a metaphor of a vanishing identity, of a Self that got lost in the greyness of an anonymous metropolis. The memory of an old love becomes an omen of existential solitude in the closing verses of another untitled poem beginning with the words *O jedno jedyne się modlę* (For just one thing I pray), where the poetess imagines herself in the physical abandonment to an inevitable end:

⁴ According to her cousin and biographer Halina Krahelska, “the town was suffocating; Krystyna felt oppressed by the narrow streets, locked up, closed off. In town she could not breathe, she missed the open fields, the wide sky. [...] The town was something alien to her, an environment in which she was not able to acquaint herself” (Krahelska 1972, 37, 63).

And that's how my heart feels,
 Like in a huge forest,
 Where someone marked the trees
 That tomorrow will be chopped. (Grochowska and Grzymała-Siedlecki 1996, 89)

Sometimes Krahelska portrays herself as a plant bound to die according to the cycle of nature, not before experiencing the disillusion of a long-awaited but unreal love:

For the annual plants
 Once it is bright spring
 And once it is autumn
 The golden time to die...
 Towards you, like towards the sun,
 Stretching
 I have grown...
 Now I know that you did not exist
 And in the wind I sway. (1972, 57)

A stray leaf, a chopped tree, a plant growing in vain towards a non-existent sun-lover all testify to the leading role of floral metaphors to convey the torment of the Self in Krahelska's poems. But it is also worth noting the use of other rhetorical figures, like metonymy, anthropomorphization, synecdoche and especially simile, to express anxiety ("I writhe like leaves on the trees", Krahelska 1978, 38), loneliness ("I was alone there, like a tree amongst the trees", Krahelska 1978, 58), or despair ("About my dark hours / Dishevelled like maples in the storm / You'll never know", Grochowska and Grzymała-Siedlecki 1996, 124).

3. Pantheistic inspirations and sepulchral fantasies

Arboreal and floral metaphors do not express only the desperation of the Self; they also convey juvenile exaltation, vibrant exuberance and the joy of living, that is, the perception that existence is a moment of ecstatic communion with the whole creation. In *La stazioncina di Torre Annunziata* (The little station of Torre Annunziata), Pozzi writes:

I felt free and weightless
like those white wads of down
that poplars release in May
and like prayers aim high. (2015a, 55)

Here the poetess enunciates an ascensional desire, a longing for absoluteness that constitutes a central theme in her works, elsewhere conveyed by the image of the mountains pointing to the sky (see Strazzeri 1994; Bernabò 2012). In a similar way, Krahełska writes of women who plunge into the landscape until becoming its integral part, pulsing to its rhythm, erasing the boundaries that separate them from the surrounding scenery. In *Czqber* (Savoury), a girl springs like water from the hills and blooms like a flowering plant. The protagonist of *Przedwiośnie* (Early spring) firstly states: "I became green / I feel it / like a tree" (Krahełska 1978: 49), then starts to dance in the grass swept by the wind. It is an obsessed dance, accompanied by a wordless song, suggesting that she is an ancestral creature, a primordial spirit living in communion with the earth. Here Krahełska takes inspiration from Slavic legends, as well as from symbolist poets, like Bolesław Leśmian, who artistically rearticulated folkloric motives. This theme returns in *Południca* (Lady Midday), in which a girl surrounded by a swarm of bees dances and sings alone in the middle of a field. In the poem, the wraith is not the wicked and evil creature of the Polish folk tradition that appears in the fields at noon, but instead looks more like a mysterious and fascinating nymph whose melodies sound "like silver wells / like blossomed stems of golden mulleins" (Krahełska 1978, 24). If the "silver wells" could be an allusion to a typical fairy-tale prop, in which magical creatures often reside (see Makowska 2011, 63), in European folklore mullein signals a place where the reign of the shadows and the world of living meet, a point of contact between natural and supernatural spheres. Pliny the Elder cites the healing powers and the magical properties of this plant, while, according to Pseudo-Apuleius, mullein is a flower consecrated to Hermes which was anciently used as a protection from the curses. The association with the world of the dead is maintained in the magic-occultist tradition, in which mullein symbolizes a door to the underworld.

Another flower linked with the dead is the asphodel, which occurs in Pozzi's *Fiabe* (Fairy tales), a dreamlike journey to a realm of wind inhabited by fantastic creatures, where a young girl carries on her shoulders a sleeping child. According to Bernabò (2012, 242–243) this could be a metaphor of the dormant female creativity that can be awakened by imagination. While "doors open wide / on buried / treasures, / rainbows

lie / shattered in lakes”, there also appear “fields of asphodel / atop the peaks” (Pozzi 2002, 75). Here Pozzi alludes to the Odysseyan “asphodel meadows”, where the souls of the departed rested, and which later became a limbic place for people not evil enough to end up in Tartarus, but neither good enough for the Elysian Fields. As an underworld flower, the asphodel is the favoured plant of symbolists, decadents and crepusculars, and as such it appears, for instance, in Giovanni Pascoli’s, Gabriele D’Annunzio’s and Sergio Corazzini’s poems. An analogous situation takes place in the literature of the Young Poland, in which flower metaphors often recur, with a predilection for exotic specimens, including asphodels. A contribution to their popularization came from the spread of French symbolism, the rediscovery of folklore and the diffusion of the “language of flowers” in the bourgeois circles. According to Ireneusz Sikora (2007), Polish poets frequently used flower-soul analogies, metaphors about the flowing of life such as blooming and withering, and similes comparing flowers to parts of the female body.

Pozzi’s private mythology also includes other plants associated with the underworld: heather, chrysanthemum, cypress, colchicum. Amongst them, a key role is played by the colchicum, a flower often mistaken for a crocus, but which is extremely poisonous. Its dual nature makes it a symbol of ambiguous and deceitful beauty, as in Guido Gozzano’s *La signorina Felicita* (Miss Felicity): “the beautiful malign flower / that kills the flowers and sows the haze” (Gozzano 1917, 83), or in Guillaume Apollinaire’s and Pascoli’s works. Pozzi depicts the colchicum as a flower of death in the poem *Addio* (Farewell), closed by the verses: “a mournful offer of violet colchicums / to a grassy grave of unknown soldiers” (Pozzi 2015a, 108), while in *Paura* (Fear) the poetess compares herself to a slender colchicum: “your purple / corolla of ghosts / you shudder under / the black / weight / of the skies” (Pozzi 2002, 21). Lastly, in *Tristezza dei colchici* (Sadness of colchicums), before being crushed by spiny chestnut hedgehogs falling from above, these flowers ask forgiveness for being born “bitter / for butterflies’ thirst / naked / for children fingers” (Pozzi 2015a: 248). In Pozzi’s poetry colchicums are an objective correlative of the female subject, whose desire to give herself completely cannot be fulfilled, but is trampled by life, and whose venomous and fragile beauty makes it impossible to be loved in return.

Krahelska paints a portrait of death by means of red-coloured flowers and bare trees, often associated with gore and war. In the poem *Wspomnienia grodzieńskie* (Memories of Grodno), a dramatic report from the destroyed town, the “red like blood dahlias” (Grochowska and Grzymała-Siedlecki 1996, 143) allude to the tragic event recently happened, while the “bloody climbing plants” (Krahelska 1978, 35) in an untitled poem

beginning with the verse *Cóż z tego, że zza szyby pęki róż się mienia* (So what if bundles of roses shimmer behind the glass) signal the arrival of autumn as a soul-season of decay and decline. In *Wiosna zawiedzionych* (The spring of the disappointed ones), written in 1940, images of “sour grass”, “frozen trees [that] did not blossom”, “plants [that] die” pile up as an objective correlative of people’s discontent for the progression of the war (Krahelska 1978, 69). More intimate is the image of the lonely pine that grows near the grave of the poetess’ grandmother, whose “twisted and convoluted branches” and “sunny stigmata on its bark” (Krahelska 1978, 39) express grief and mourning, as do the “birch’s leaves piling up over the tomb of an unknown Uhlan” in the aforementioned *Wspomnienia grodzieńskie*. As we can see, when people suffer, in Krahelska’s poems, nature suffers as well and shows clear signs of deformation, pain, sterility and bleakness.

4. Erotic desire and love disillusion

In Krahelska’s poems, a central role is played by the viburnum as a plant linked to love and disillusion. Its symbolism is rooted in Romantic literature⁵ and in Polish, Ruthenian and Ukrainian traditional culture. According to Sarnowska-Giefing (1976, 159), viburnum is “the favourite plant of folk poetry”, in which it represents youth, femininity and purity. However, Krahelska does not mention its abundant white flowers, but its crimson berries as an emblem of a sensual promise of love unfaithfully turning into a harsh disenchantment. In this meaning, the plant appears in *Jesień białoruska* (Belarusian autumn), where “a grey dew bleeds its drops in viburnums” (Krahelska 1978, 61). Then it returns in *Olcha* (Alder), a choral polyphony that shows a fascinating pantheism soaked with animistic features (see Amenta 2016, 41–43). Here red viburnum berries sink in deep dark waters like grains of a broken rosary, suggesting self-dispersion and love unfulfillment. From a semantic point of view, viburnum is infused with pessimistic nuances: it suggests shattered innocence, interrupted youth, denied femininity. The plant appears as a symbol of deceitful love in an untitled poem beginning with the verse *Kalinowym mostem chodziłam* (On a viburnum bridge I walked): little by little, while viburnum berries sink under the surface of the water, the memory of the lover also disappears. It is

⁵ See for example Teofil Lenartowicz’s *Kalina* (Viburnum) and *Na liść kalinowy* (For a viburnum leaf) or Juliusz Słowacki’s *Balladyna* and *Beniowski*.

worth noting that in Polish and Ukrainian folklore, the “viburnum bridge” represents a magic gangway hanging over the waters of life and the ones who cross it see their juvenile illusions fade away forever (Zaleski 1877, 258). At the end of the poem, the viburnum occurs with this very meaning, while the female protagonist watches her expectations and dreams sink one after the other:

On a viburnum bridge I walked,
A viburnum heart I lost,
It drowned like sour berries
At the bottom, at the bottom
Under the dark water. (Krahelska 1978, 71)

Krahelska probably takes inspiration from the popular Polesian folksong *Czerwone jagody* (Red berries), whose opening words are: “Red berries / fall in the water / people say / I am not pretty” (Hławiczka 1938, 20–21), but she completely reshapes the theme, adding also a melancholic, sorrowful tone absent in the original text. Likewise, the quince, traditionally associated with the goddess Venus and love (see Cattabiani 1996, 345–348), is used by Krahelska in a poem that plays with motives taken from the courtly poetry. When the two protagonists of *Ballada o księżniczce* (A ballad about a princess, Krahelska 1978, 104) meet for the first time, the quinces are blooming; later, when the princess flees from her adoring squire in the throes of a storm of the senses, she runs on a carpet of quince petals falling to the ground. Lastly, the quinces wilt under the feeble light of the moon, suggesting the ultimate separation of the lovers. The blooming and the fading of the tree mark and symbolize the birth, the evolution and the tragic end of an unfortunate love (see also Makowska 2011, 67).

In Pozzi’s poems, the image of love as an unoffered gift often recurs, masterfully rendered with the image of the flowers that bloom inside a girl, a “vast unshared mass” that piles up until it withers, at the same time taking her breath away in the poem *I fiori* (Flowers). It is a multifaceted metaphor of the inhibited sexual desire and of a feeling bound to be repressed, but also of an unborn child:

Who’ll sell me a flower today?
I have so many in my heart:
but all clasped
in heavy bunches –

trampled –
done in.
I have so many that my soul
suffocates and nearly dies
under their vast unshared
mass. (Pozzi 2012, n.p.)

The flowers cannot be offered because they are impure: they symbolize an erotic, not a spiritual desire. Antonia Pozzi introjects her lover's expectations, a lover who wants her to be angel-like, disembodied, desexualized.⁶ At the same time, the poetess cannot erase herself as a "subject-body" (Papi 2013, 32) and ignore the call of the senses. Such a dichotomy produces an interior laceration that cannot be resewn and therefore becomes a source of discomfort and inadequacy. In *Canto selvaggio* (Wild song), a girl imagines getting undressed and lying on the grass so that the setting sun, "a dying god", could quench his thirst with her blood. The girl's carnal desire cannot go unpunished: her veins get emptied, while "the stars angrily stone / my dried, dead flesh" (Pozzi 2015a, 98). In the poem, the stars represent both the external judgement and interiorized guilt. Her lover wants instead an incorporeal love, a communion of souls, an uncorrupted gift symbolized by the "immaculate and untouched" edelweiss that the protagonist of *Flora alpina* (Alpine flora) offers to him, because, she says, "it can't harm you" (Pozzi 2015a, 99). Only by repressing her femininity and becoming a lifeless body (or a soul without a body), can the woman be accepted by her lover. As Papi states, "the gift of herself must pass through an amendment of the 'impure soul'" (2012, 33). But in doing so, the woman becomes a white, lifeless edelweiss that resembles "a bloodless hand" (Pozzi 2015a, 99).

⁶ On the unfortunate love between Antonia Pozzi and her teacher Anton Maria Cervi, hardly prevented by the poetess' family due to her young age and her lover's social status, see Papi 2013; Bernabò 2012. Also Krahelska's poems bear the traces of her unlucky relationship with the aviator Stanisław Wujastyk, who married another woman while stationing in France during World War II (see Grochowska and Grzymała-Siedlecki 1996).

5. Conclusions

Despite getting inspiration from Romantic, Modernist and even Medieval literature (as in the case of colchicum, asphodel or quince), or from folklore and mythology (for instance viburnum and mullein), Antonia Pozzi and Krystyna Krahelska derive their knowledge of the flora first and foremost from direct contact with the nature in what would become their *locus poeticus*: the alpine scenery of Valsassina in Northern Italy for Pozzi, the rural Polesian landscape for Krahelska. For both of them, flora constitutes a symbolic language whose traditional meanings weave together with personal reinterpretations, sometimes resulting in substantial semantic swerves. Flora provides a poetical vocabulary, mainly rendered with such rhetorical figures as metonymy, metaphor, synecdoche, anthropomorphization and simile, straddling tradition and innovation. Flowers, trees and plants allow the poetesses to express a peculiar *Weltanschauung* strictly connected with women's experience of the surrounding world, of the body, of the eroticism, of unfulfilled desires and expectations. They ultimately contribute to creating private mythology founded on a double-edged relationship with nature as an offshoot of the Self. On the one hand, nature embodies an outpouring of juvenile yearning and vitalistic impulse, while on the other hand, it constitutes a distorting mirror that emphasizes the experience of alienation, sufferance and solitude.

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