

REVIEW ESSAY

**BOTANISTS AND POETS:  
HOW TO INTRODUCE AN ASPHODEL**

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**M. M. Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist*.  
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Molly Mahood's is a book long awaited by some Lawrentians, who have been anxious to see a monograph that does justice to his writing on wildflowers in particular but also on grasses, trees and vegetation more generally. It should be admitted, however, that the remarkable work she has produced is far more rich, scholarly and extensive than the present reviewer could ever have envisaged. The focus of *The Poet as Botanist* is literary, but the book would not be out of place shelved with studies of the history of ideas. Mahood traces the development of botany as a science from the mid-eighteenth to the twentieth century, and shows how this development has informed the works of a band of botanist poets – Erasmus Darwin, William Wordsworth, Crabbe, Clare, Ruskin and Lawrence.

As a literary-historical scholar, Mahood has felt duty-bound to include the older Darwin's now seemingly bizarre verse popularisations of the Linnaean system. Bucolic volumes like *The Loves of the Plants* (1789) were popular in their late neo-classical day, Mahood explains, for catching the rising wave of interest in botany and for decorating the science with a range of mythological analogies, as sexually polymorphous and titillating to the eighteenth-century reader as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. While she

attempts some rehabilitation of Erasmus Darwin's reputation, he is there mainly as a foil for his grandson Charles's botanical experiments with *Primula* species and orchids – the Darwin whose bicentenary we have been celebrating should be acknowledged as a pioneer botanist as well as zoologist, Mahood reminds us – and also as a foil for the English Romantics' re-discovery of non-human and human nature. As history of science, her study centres on Charles Darwin's joyful investigation of insect cross-pollination in cowslips; as literary history, it centres on those poets whose observation and knowledge of botanical structure and process deepened their responsiveness to "the meanest flower that blows".<sup>1</sup> Her criterion for the botanist poet is that he or she should articulate, in the phrase of an unnamed geneticist, "a feeling for the organism", or in Coleridge's words, appreciate the "proper interest" of Nature. A poet will know what that interest is, Coleridge explains, "who believes & feels, that every Thing has a Life of its own, & that we are all *one Life*".<sup>2</sup> Readers of Lawrence will be delighted, though not surprised, to learn that, on this criterion, Mahood declares Lawrence the crowning exemplar of the botanist poet in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Mahood's book is not for those without the rudiments of a classical and scientific education. It is rich in learning, teeming with ideas from the sciences, history and the arts, and crammed with literary and biographical detail. Her first chapter takes Wordsworth's account of a primrose in 'Peter Bell' –

A primrose by the river's brim  
A yellow primrose was to him  
And it was nothing more.<sup>3</sup>

– and in a longer unfinished poem, 'The Tuft of Primroses', in which he strove to balance his longing for personal stability against a bleak conviction that everything dear must pass away. These primrose poems are correlated with Charles Darwin's experiments on the genus *Primula*, experiments that proved, against the

biologist's expectations, that neither one of the two forms of cowslip was self-pollinating (and hence less highly evolved than the other). In the course of parallelling Wordsworth's creativity at Dove Cottage with Charles Darwin's at Down House, Mahood shows her penchant for accessing original documents. Not only does she identify the edition of William Withering's *Introduction to the Study of Botany* which Dorothy Wordsworth asked her brother William to purchase for her in 1800; she has accessed the copy and refers to Dorothy and her brother's annotations. Dorothy had the greater love for wildflowers, William falling back on his sister's quicker sense of their beauty to alert him to subjects for poems. Again, while Wordsworth has some fine poems on flowers, 'The Tuft of Primroses' (moving though it is in the biographical context supplied) is not among them. Mahood compares the vague religiosity of Wordsworth's phrasing with the informative clarity of Darwin's prose to the poet's disadvantage. Yet Mahood also dispels preconceptions about the pure objectivity of scientific inquiry. Darwin had immense fun with his cowslips, and his botanical work can be seen as a taking refuge from the controversy about the descent of man, his vain search for hybrid self-pollinating *Primulas* as a probing of his misgivings over a first-cousin marriage.

As if this diptych of poetic and scientific imaginations at work were not a sufficiently large canvas, Mahood performs a detour through Renaissance herbals and how these were plundered by the Elizabethans for calendars and catalogues. She backgrounds the English precursors of Linnaeus' *Species Plantarum* (1753). The chapter is book-ended by Ruskin's remarks on 'Peter Bell' in *Modern Painters* and by Lawrence's in '... Love Was Once a Little Boy'. Their remarks seem to have much in common. For Ruskin, "the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings, and to whom the primrose is for ever nothing else than itself – a little flower, apprehended in the very plain and leafy fact of it" is a poet of the first order;<sup>4</sup> for Lawrence, "A primrose has its own peculiar primrosy identity, and all the oversouling in the world won't melt it out into a Williamish oneness" (*RDP* 335). Mahood is nonetheless

aware how Ruskin's nature writing developed after *Modern Painters*, into a polemic against the Darwinian theory that the beauty of flowers had evolved to ensure their survival and a deranged revulsion against insects being the means of pollinating such beauty. She demonstrates how Lawrence, in his own early writing, had to fight his way clear of a diluted Ruskinian tradition of "wilfully anthropocentric" and "elegantly written" flower-books. (Think of the debates about flowers and their picking in *Sons and Lovers*). While she regards the aspersion on Wordsworth's "oversouling" as unjustified, Mahood concludes that the essays in which Lawrence hammered out his *Naturphilosophie*, and more particularly "the poems about flowers that he wrote in his last decade", represent "a strengthening of the scientific vision by the sacramental", a synthesis which "entitles him to be seen as the Poet Laureate of the plant kingdom".<sup>5</sup>

The long first chapter does not, in fact, conclude with those words but with a brief lament that the latter part of the twentieth century, in which science and literature began to agree that *Homo sapiens* should regard itself as one species among others, was in practice an age in which over-acquisitiveness and over-population threatened with disappearance so many animal and plant species, including even some of the *Primulas*. Last year, in two woods not far from the Ouse, I was privileged to come upon some remnant clumps of oxlips – a rare treat for a visitor – and I fancy Mahood herself has walked similar woods in Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. She has, notwithstanding, no patience with ecocriticism, which she finds too "prescriptive" – a misuse of criticism, one might add, that gives too little sense of the life of the organism, or of poetry, or of science. She admires the Australian poet, Judith Wright, for having been a great poet of the environment and an environmental activist, and for never having confused the two roles.

This is not the journal in which to give a full account of the chapters on other botanist poets, but that on John Clare is both germane and enlightening. Mahood goes well beyond confident

identification of Clare's dialect flower names. She finds in Clare a gifted field naturalist, able to distinguish with the naked eye "eight or nine kinds of cuckoo flower and half a dozen species of mallow".<sup>6</sup> As a natural historian, however, he could not have made the progress he did without educated friends who shared his interests and could supply him with books and journals. Clare rejected Linnaeus' *Species plantarum* as a "dark system", was repelled by the floral sex of Erasmus Darwin's "prying thought", and was unable to collaborate with Joseph Henderson, the head gardener of Milton House, on a prose 'Natural History of Helpston'. For a moment Mahood seems to shake her head about Clare's lacking "a scientific cast of mind", but she does not lose sight of his maintaining the equipment he needed to be "bard of wildflowers": he had "a feeling for the essential character of a flower, something as instantly recognisable as a friend's laugh or turn of the head". It was more important for Clare as poet to remember where he was and who he was with when he saw a flower – and to recall, as would an ecologist, those other species he saw it with – than "to consign it to order *Gyandria*: class *Monandria*: genus *Orchis*: species *Mascula*".<sup>7</sup> Mahood does not devalue a poet or overvalue a poem to fit either of her synoptic histories, of botany or literature.

What is true of her chapter on Clare is also true of a final chapter in which Mahood compresses a kaleidoscope of brilliant critical observations into a little room. There are extended treatments of Theodore Roethke's greenhouse poems, with their re-entry into childish wonder at lives "not yet distinct from his own" and final "slither into neo-natal life", and of Ted Hughes's flower portraits, which enable Mahood to contend that "The violence for which Hughes's early poetry was often adversely criticised is in fact energy", energy that begins "with the primary producers".<sup>8</sup> On balance, Mahood's assessment of Hughes is more an insight than special pleading. Of particular interest is her attention to the Northern Irish poet, Michael Longley's verse. No more is claimed of Longley's scientific learning than that he is a passionate "field

botanist” of “County Clare’s botanic Eden”, the Burren. Longley’s ‘The Ice Cream Man’, memorialising one peculiarly random and vicious killing during the Troubles, is based on the kind of catalogue (indeed, a pair of catalogues) that Mahood deprecates in Renaissance poetry. The poet’s daughter used to list the ice-cream flavours the Man sold, and when the family hear of his murder all the father can think to do is name for her “all the wildflowers of the Burren / I had seen in one day: thyme, valerian, loosestrife ...” The flower names continue for another four lines, not one dispensable to the poem’s incantation of healing, of a wished-for purgation of communal hatreds.<sup>9</sup> Poets who sacralise the living earth are forever generating new forms to do so, a recognition which makes Mahood wary of the flashy botanical terminology she extracts from two or three recent anthologies. She prefers the purified diction of Judith Wright’s ‘Phaius Orchid’ –

Out of the brackish sand  
see the phaius orchid build  
her intricate moonlight tower  
that rusts away in flower.

For whose eyes – for whose eyes  
does this blind being weave  
sand’s poverty, water’s sour,  
the white and black of the hour

into the image I hold  
and cannot understand? <sup>10</sup>

– a poem she thinks refers to the bog orchid, *Phaius australis*. I am neither a local nor an expert, never having seen a Queensland orchid of the genus, and I base my guess on W. H. Nicholls’s study of the continent’s orchids. Although *Phaius bernasyii*, a creamy yellow variety of *australis* – “once locally common” but “now rare because of extensive collecting” – might plausibly be described as

building “a moonlight tower”, *Phaius tankervilleae*, found “chiefly in wet coastal situations”, has the more likely habitat.<sup>11</sup> The *tankervilleae*’s petals are white in bud, but open to reveal the bloom’s dusky carmines, browns and yellows. The species does rust “in flower”.

From the core-English poetic diction of Judith Wright, to the vigorous mix of registers heard in the ‘Flowers’ from Lawrence’s *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, is a long stride in terms of taste, but Mahood makes it effortlessly. She claims, indeed, that this section of the volume forms the centre of his Laureate achievement. To ‘Almond Blossom’ and ‘Sicilian Cyclamens’ she gives the un-Laurentian accolade “perfect”. She writes with understanding of how ‘Purple Anemones’ turns on its head the Homeric ‘Hymn to Demeter’, and relishes the poem’s sly domestic humour about Mother intervening in Persephone and Pluto’s marital difficulties. In closing, she speculates that Lawrence had in mind Milton’s Ceres, “*Proserpin*” and “gloomie *Dis*”,<sup>12</sup> and was “reaching back behind Milton’s northern dread of winter to a Mediterranean understanding that plants need cold and darkness for their survival and propagation”.<sup>13</sup> She grasps the significance of Lawrence’s first two poems in the King notebook being ‘Campions’ and ‘Guelder Roses’ and of the first entries in the Clarke notebook being not poems but botanical notes and diagrams. And she makes pointed observations on the floral backdrops to the Miriam poems and on *Look! We Have Come Through!*’s rose sequence.

Even bigger breakthroughs are made with Lawrence’s fiction and travel essays. Mahood has an appreciation that floral *symbolism* is not so plentiful in *Sons and Lovers*; instead, an abundance of episodes traces the characters’ *relationships* with flowers; and she concludes that Mrs Morel and Paul’s second encounter with a madonna lily (at the end of ‘The Test on Miriam’) is somewhat overdone. She draws attention to forget-me-nots and pine-boughs in Wragby wood, and how the latter, reflecting upon the state of the wood since Sir Geoffrey Chatterley’s depredation of its hardwood timber for the war effort, make for an unexpected phoenix nest. She

uncovers the notes Lawrence kept from Botany Smith's lectures at Nottingham University College, and uses these, and a manuscript of *The Rainbow*, to demonstrate that the unicellular organism which affords Ursula her epiphany of life and selfhood as she stares down the College microscope was not a protozoic plant-animal, of the kind evolutionists hypothesised must have preceded the parting of the ways of the two kingdoms. Rather it was a Ciliate, probably *Paramecium caudatum*, and hence an animal. Since Lawrence could not have seen such an organism on the formalin-fixed specimen slides at his College, Mahood further conjectures that Bunny Garnett, by then researching for a Masters in zoology at Imperial College, might have smuggled Lawrence into a more up-to-date laboratory at the London College, perhaps in early 1915. Revisiting essays like 'San Gaudenzio' in *Twilight in Italy* and 'Flowery Tuscany' (collected in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*), she convinces this reviewer that what Lawrence achieved in his prose description of another variety of Mediterranean anemone – the Adonis blood or Venus' tears – is not a whit inferior to 'Purple Anemones'. Again, Mahood reminds us of the wit as well as wonder of the evocation – "how the poor lady [Venus] must have wept" (*SEP* 233) – and approves the non-Erasmian brusqueness of Lawrence's treatment of the classical myth.

The Lawrence chapter closes with the 'Bavarian Gentians' series. In the earlier "'Nettles" Notebook' version, Mahood locates a tension between "happy contemplation" of the gentians and apprehension at the descent to which the gentians seem to beckon, a conflict which she finds resolved in the final "'Last Poems" Notebook' version. There Lawrence's "instinctive way of looking" takes over, his botanical vision and "empathy with a plant's distinctive habit of growth". It is the gentian's signature – the "ribbed, erect corolla" which "flares back abruptly into points" – that "gives rise to the torch image" and hence to the resolve to journey down into the dark,<sup>14</sup> a darkness that the flower itself models. Mahood is, as always, an alert and pungent critic. Her ending with the 'Gentians' series makes such a shapely conclusion



to the chapter that it may seem captious to complain of two omissions in her reading. But allow me to play the nagging reviewer for a paragraph.

The gentian is as much symbol as it is botanical specimen. Much of the power of the gentian poems derives from Lawrence's unheralded insertion of the flower into myths and rituals of vegetative and spiritual dying and resurrection, an intervention that renews empathy with the flower as well as with the ancient mysteries, but does not contribute to observation or scientific knowledge of the flower. Secondly, Mahood does not identify the species of gentian which Frieda and her sister, Else Jaffe, remember Lawrence having by his bed in the Rottach-am-Tegernsee inn. Frieda recalls an "enormous bunch of gentians", whereas Else describes "a great bush of pale blue autumn gentians",<sup>15</sup> giving some colour to the notion that the species of gentian in the room might have differed from the referent species in the poem. Earlier, in Mahood's discussion of 'The Captain's Doll', she has pointed to the "stars of pale-lavender gentian, touched with earth-colour" (Fox 133), that Hannele and Hepburn see by the roadside during their ascent of the Kaprun Valley, in Bavaria. She notes that Hannele picks some of the "high-mountain species of what is in effect *her* Bavarian national flower";<sup>16</sup> and the dust-jacket of *The Poet as Botanist* bears a light-filled photograph of the pale-lavender fringe gentian, *Gentianella ciliata*. The species of Lawrence's gentian poems cannot be *ciliata*, however: his way of looking would not have overlooked the cilia fringing the corolla, and he insists on the flowers' dark, decidedly *dark* blue colouration. From first version to last, the flower's "Deepening of colour", the gradations of blue "darkened on blueness", are what draw perception "down the darker and darker stairs" to "the living dark",<sup>17</sup> the congress of the gods within. The best-known of Alpine gentians, the intense and darkly blue *Gentiana clusii* or trumpet gentian is the prime candidate for Lawrence's Bavarian gentian. My apologies to Mahood if the point seems too obvious to be worth making.

Mahood's quotation from one of Clare's letters – "when we notice these things", wildflowers primarily, "we feel a desire to know their names as of so many friends & acquaintance"<sup>18</sup> – leads me to a last point about Lawrence's flower writing. It is at its best on the one continent (and offshore island) where he knew the names by which to introduce flowers to readers. In England, Bavaria and Italy, he deserves the laurel which Mahood awards him. In the final chapter of *Kangaroo*, the memorial feat of describing the unnamed wildflowers in the Australian bush above Thirroul is remarkable, and valuable – many species have been picked out and lost to that segment of the Escarpment and Loddon River – but the result strikes me as a more superficial record than, for instance, the reconstructed flower-picking scenes of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Likewise, flowers are thinner in Lawrence's American prose than they are, in botanical fact, in the high desert around Taos.

These absences remind me of another, fleeting disappointment with Mahood's study: she makes no reference to the passage in 'Cerveteri' in which Lawrence writes of a tall pink asphodel he has noticed in the Roma and Catania regions. "Sparky, assertive" and stinky, with "just a touch of the onion about it", this pink asphodel has "a certain reckless glory which the Greeks loved". Lawrence proceeds to tell of a "scholastic Englishman" who believed the true Greek asphodel was "probably the single daffodil", a speculation that Lawrence, having seen "a very nice and silky yellow asphodel on Etna, pure gold", ridicules (*SEP* 14-15). The golden Sicilian flower is the yellow asphodel, *Asphodeline lutea*; the English classical scholar might be Lawrence's long-time sparring partner, Norman Douglas, whose *Birds and Beasts of the Greek Anthology* Lawrence had originally known as 'The Flowers of the Greek Anthology' (*5L* 441); but the Cerveteri asphodel? – *Asphodelus fistulosus*, a Mediterranean native, is also known as the onion-leaved or pink asphodel. It is currently listed as an exotic and toxic weed in the U.S.A., and hence is quickly found on the Internet – embarrassingly so, for someone who had been hoping Mahood

(who cannot be expected to gloss every flower reference in Lawrence) or some other scholar would satisfy his too-idle curiosity. Looking up the notes to the Cambridge *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, in which “Etna” is annotated but not the “pure gold” or the pink asphodel, had caused me to miscalculate the difficulty of the search.

The Cambridge editors have not felt obliged to treat Lawrence’s flowers as friends with whom readers should become acquainted. Yet surely, if readers are to judge the qualities of Lawrence’s flower writing, it helps to have named those flowers not given a common name. Few readers can familiarise themselves with every locale of which Lawrence has written, but there are guides and manuals, as well as the Internet, to find out flowers exotic to the reader. *Poet as Botanist* has made prodigious inroads against the commonplace turning of a blind eye to botanical taxonomy, a too-frequent disability in criticism of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry and prose. Now is the time to open up a dialogue – many dialogues – to carry Mahood’s ground-breaking discoveries forward.

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’, l. 203, in *The Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt, Vol. IV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940-9), 285.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, ed. E. L. Griggs, Vol. II (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 864.

<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, ‘Peter Bell’, ll. 248-50, in *Poetical Works*, Vol. II, 341.

<sup>4</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Vol. III (London: Dent, 1905), 151.

<sup>5</sup> M. M. Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 47.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 131, 126-8, 121.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 230, 244.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 239-40.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Wright, *Collected Poems, 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1994), 88.

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<sup>11</sup> W. H. Nicholls, *Orchids of Australia* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1969), 101, Pl. 367-8.

<sup>12</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV. 268-72, in *The Poetical Works* (London: Oxford UP, 1958), 80.

<sup>13</sup> Mahood, 215-16.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 224-5.

<sup>15</sup> Frieda Lawrence, "Not I, But the Wind ..." (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 200; and cf. *D. H. Lawrence: A Composite Biography*, ed. Edward Nehls, Vol. III (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1959), 426.

<sup>16</sup> Mahood, 212.

<sup>17</sup> *Poems* 676-7, 973-5, 975. "Deepening of colour" does not appear in the texts of 'Glory of darkness' or 'Bavarian Gentians' in *Complete Poems*. Unusually, in 973-5, Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts did attempt to show Lawrence's redrafting of the manuscript poem over two pages of 'The "Nettles" Notebook' (Roberts E192b), but the attempt was incomplete and as a consequence inaccurate. 'Glory of darkness' is a prime example of an autograph palimpsest in which ink-shades and pencil make distinct levels of revision detectable. The lines "Deepening of colour / is darkness ..." appear in the second draft of this notebook poem. All four drafts will be shown in the Cambridge edition of the *Poems*.

<sup>18</sup> Mahood, 121; quoted from *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 284.