

“Labour of Love” – Ovidian Flower-Figures in William Blake’s *Songs**

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Dixit et ignotas animum dimittit
in artes naturamque novat.
(Met 8.188-9)

*To create a little flower is the labour of ages.
(A Proverb of Hell in MHH)*

In deconstructive writings we can often find references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as the Ovidian work presents the anthropomorphic process of prosopopoetic naming in its narratives. However, while Paul de Man thinks that in the stories “anthropomorphism freezes the infinite chain of tropological transformations [...] into one single assertion,” J. H. Miller emphasises the power of “aberrant figurative language” exercised by the gods (via Ovid) (de Man 241 and Miller 5). Actually, in the literary allusions to *Metamorphoses*, we can see ‘the allegorisation of linguistic power’ revealed by the Ovidian (not only deconstructive) readers. In her collection of essays, *The Metamorphosis of Ovid*, Sarah Annes Brown, tracing the so-called ‘Ovidian’ line in English works, discusses the different levels of *Ovidianism* emphasising that such research is definitely fruitful:

Identifying a relationship between two poets, pinpointing verbal *echoes* or the provenance of a plot motif, does not necessarily enhance our appreciation of a text, or affect the way we interpret it. We have to perceive a dynamic interplay of some kind between the two works if source hunting is to become an interpretative tool not just a footnote opportunity. [...] So an understanding of the way one text lies behind another text (or image) may radically *alter* our perception of that later

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text, offering new interpretative possibilities (Brown 14-16. Italics are mine. É.A.)¹

Echoing Brown's ideas, in the present paper I intend to map connections between Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and William Blake's *Songs* concentrating on their transformed anthropomorphic flower-figures. I will analyse the Ovidian reminiscences in the Blakean "unmediated visions," reflecting on "the inherent tension that resides in the metaphorical language" of the mythological stories and the lyrics (de Man 7).²

William Blake (1757–1827), being the forerunner – or one of – the Romantics, started to write poems in the fading decades of the Augustan period of neoclassicism. Actually, he was less influenced by the greatest satirists' – Pope's, Swift's, Gay's, and Dr Johnson's – works than by the new trends of nature, Graveyard and Gothic poetry. Moreover, in his works, the classical English and ancient sources and readings were re-contextualised by his greatest inspiration, the *Bible*. Apostrophising the Bible as the Great Code of Art, "he warmly declared that all he knew was in the Bible" (quoted in Tannenbaum 3). Although Blake knew and read the great classics of literature, he displays an ambiguous relation to the dominant neoclassical trend of his own age, namely, the imitation of the style, patterns and forms of the classical Greek and Roman literary works. On the one hand, in several of his writings the deeply Christian poet ardently attacks neoclassicism and the copying of the great classical authors. In "Preface" written to *Milton*, he claims that "we do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations." Here he also names the 'spiritless' ancient authors: "[t]he Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid, of Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to contemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible" (Blake 480). According to S. Foster Damon, Blake thought that the original source of the Greek and Latin accounts of the Creation and the Flood could be only the Bible, therefore the classical writers not only 'robbed' the text, contextualising it in Greek or Roman culture, but also deprived it from its spiritual sublimity (Damon 313). Writing

¹ It can happen that *Metamorphoses* transforms our reading of Blake. Actually, Brown's ideas echo Charles Martindale's on hermeneutics quoting T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" ("Introduction" in *Ovid Renewed*, ed. by Charles Martindale, Cambridge and New York: CUP, 1989, 2). In her work she tries to show the indebtedness of English literature to the classical work. Here we can find an impressive list of English authors starting from the greatest ones, such as Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton through Marvell, Keats, and Beddoes to Browning, Joyce, and Woolf.

² In the writing of my text on the flower-figures, I was greatly inspired by not only the proximity to 'divine nature' expressed in the Greek stories and Blake's works, but also by de Man's writings on the 'nature' of the rhetorical tropes in romantic poetry.

about Virgil’s poetry (“On Virgil”), Blake also expresses that the ancient cultures seemed to support and foster arts and sciences, however, being a “War-like State,” they were rather destroyers than producers (Blake 778).

On the other hand, in his poetic works (and also in his paintings) Blake the visionary frequently alludes to the fantastic stories of Greek and Roman mythology. As he says in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*:

Vision or imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is Form’d by the daughters of Memory. Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration, [...] Let it here be Noted that the Greek Fables originated in Spiritual Mystery & Real Visions, which are lost & clouded in Fable & Allegory, [...] The Nature of my Work is Visionary or Imaginative ; it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients call’d the Golden Age. (Blake 605)

While Blake attacks the simple work of memory and imitation, he defends the original power of Greek imagination, which is related to the only true source of inspiration, and finds its expression in the visionary transformations.

For Blake the storehouse of these sublime though pagan visions was Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which he probably read in Sandys’ translation in the early 1780s then in the original in 1800s, and he was fascinated by the imaginative figurality of Ovid’s work. As it is recorded in Bentley’s *Blake Records* the poet was very fond of Ovid and in his youth, besides Shakespeare’s works, his favourite readings were Ovid’s writings (Bentley 428 and 527). Furthermore, above his desk, next to Dürer’s *Melancholy*, there was a painting about an Ovidian figure as it is recorded in Gilchrist’s biography:

Samuel Palmer, in a letter to Gilchrist of 23 August 1855, wrote that Blake delighted in Ovid, and, as a labour of Love, had executed a finished picture from the *Metamorphoses*, after Giulio Romano. This design hung in his room, and close by his engraving table, Albert Dürer’s *Melancholy the Mother of Invention*, [...]. (Bentley 565. n. 3. and Gilchrist 324)

Giulio Romano (1492–1546), the Italian mannerist painter and Raphael’s pupil, was rather famous for his highly sexual works, such as the scandalous drawings, *I modi: Positions* illustrating Aretino’s erotic sonnets. Although the importance of sexuality is also emphasised in Blake’s works, a stronger connection between their *oeuvre* should be revealed, namely that Romano, similarly to Blake, dedicated several of his works to Greek mythological love-stories. As Janet Cox-Rearick comments, the eroticism of the earlier drawings also pervades Romano’s

later Mantuan paintings and frescoes in Palazzo Te, when the “greatest inspiration [...] was Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, specifically the stories of the amorous adventures of the gods (particularly Jupiter), known as the Loves of the Gods” (76).³

Thus, it can be imagined that the painting above Blake’s desk, showing an Ovidian episode designed in Romano’s style, might show a passionate love scene of *Metamorphoses* emphasising virility. Nevertheless, regarding the title of the other picture, *Melancholy*, and the placing of these two together, we should assume that a more spiritual drawing hung in Blake’s working-room, which was related to the idea of human transformation as it had a central role in his way of thinking. In his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789-1794) Blake tries to show “the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul” basically relying on the Biblical description of the alterations, or rather *transformations*, in human conditions before and after the Fall (Blake 210). However, embedded in his Christian universe, we can find several references to Ovid’s mythical transformations – mainly, in his flower-poems.

In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* we can come across lots of references to flowers: the word itself, either in singular or plural, appears more than 40 times in the 15 books. In several cases flowers are taken as natural beauties, which the “the soft breeze of tender zephyrs wafted and caressed” (*Met* 1:108), or, as springtime flowers “bloomed” in the pastoral landscape (*Met* 2.27; 7.284; 15.204).⁴ In other passages flowers are used as decorations in garlands (*Met* 10.123; 13.928) and at commemorating feasts (e.g. *Met* 9.87; 15.688). In the text, besides their natural and occasional usage, flowers are taken metaphorically as *flowers of rhetoric*, referring to someone’s youth (*Met* 7.216 and 9.436), beauty and virginity (e.g. *Met* 10.85 and 14.764). In addition to general references, several flower-types appear; most frequently violets, lilies, and roses. These flowers are associated with specific colours – white, crimson, purple, and yellow – and their colours

³ In the Camera di Ovidio *The Rape of Europe* is accompanied by the depictions of the rape of Proserpina by Pluto and of Aymone by Neptune. The expressive drawings illustrate the Ovidian episodes when Jupiter transformed himself into different animal guises so as to seduce the chosen mortal maidens. While the above mentioned works are really erotic, in the pornographic *Jupiter and Olympias* the God disguised as a half-serpent, half-eagle beast is just about to rape the woman, which is indicated by his erection (Cox-Rearick 84-85).

⁴ In the paper, the direct quotations are from Mandelbaum’s poetic translation, subsequently abbreviated as *Met*, while the numbering of the lines follows the original Latin text. Besides the Latin text, I read and used different English translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Mary M. Innes popular prose translation (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, The Penguin Classics, 1955, repr. 1961), the seventeenth-century verse translation made by Sandys (1626) and the eighteenth-century version published by Garth (1717) as Blake was supposed to read the former one.

can fade, mingle, or change. Moreover, tragic stories are started with the heroine’s picking of flowers, usually lilies and violets. We can think of Europa’s garlands, with which she decorated the white bull’s horns (*Met* 2.867-8); Proserpina’s favourite flowery meadow where she is ravished (*Met* 5.390-401); Salmacis’ flower gathering by her pool before her passionate attack on Hermaphroditus (*Met* 4.315), or Dryope’s unfortunate lotus-plucking (*Met* 9.340-5). On the whole, to quote Charles Paul Segal’s statement, in the Ovidian landscape flowers “are traditionally associated with virginal purity and also with its vulnerability [...] the flower-motif reflects the loss of innocence” (33-4). In my paper, after these general remarks, I will concentrate on the Ovidian episodes of miraculous transformations where a flower-type is put in the centre. In *Metamorphoses* these are the lily, the rose, the narcissus, the lotus, the hyacinth, and the heliotrope in the episodes of Proserpina, Adonis, Narcissus, Dryope (and Lotis), Hyacinthus (and Ajax), and Clytie, respectively.

Likewise, in Blake’s textual and visual works, flowers gain importance as well. His Flowers, dignified with a capital, are shown as individuals and Blake is concerned “with the hidden causes of [their] wondrous achievements” (Tolley 125). In his *Songs*, similarly to the settings of Ovid’s work, the flower-figures are placed in pastoral landscapes recalling the Eden like world of innocence.⁵ In the very first poem titled “Introduction,” it is revealed that these *Songs* are requested by an angelic child, who wants every child to understand the poems: “And I wrote my happy songs / Every child may joy to hear” (Blake 111). In *Songs of Innocence* we cannot read about specific and special flowers, only happy blossoms and joyful buds (e.g. in “The Blossom” and “Night”). In the poems, blossoms and buds, being the signs of spring, are also taken metaphorically: in “The School Boy” the dreary classes threaten the boy depriving him of his “youthful spring” “if buds are nip’d / And blossoms blown away” (Blake 124). Although the vernal and peaceful atmosphere recalls the Ovidian, in *Metamorphoses* the pastoral landscape evokes desire and heightens the dangers innocent maidens have to face in the “sensual paradise” (Segal 9).⁶ In Blake’s *Songs* the happy spring days are associated with childhood and the innocence man had before the Fall in the Garden. In the ironically innocent “Holy Thursday,” the phrase “flowers of London town” refers to the colourfully

⁵ Actually, not only in Blake’s *Songs*, but also in his prophecies we can meet the atmosphere of the sensual Ovidian pastoral, for instance, in the introduction of *Europe, A Prophecy*, a Fairy sitting on a tulip promises a book written on petals of eternal flowers (Blake 237). I can also mention the description of the vales of Har in *The Book of Thel*, of Beulah in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, or, of the highly seductive landscapes in *Vala, or the Four Zoas*. To find and analyse the connections of these works and *Metamorphoses* can result in another paper.

⁶ In his work Segal emphasises the sexual symbolism of the Ovidian landscape, analysing the motifs of caves, water and flowers in *Metamorphoses*.

dressed children marching from their Charity Schools to the St. Paul's Cathedral, which, even in an ironic context, can express the naivety and purity of the cheerful poor children (Blake 122). Contrasted with it, in *Songs of Experience* the tragic stories of individual flower-figures are told. That is, Blake's two series display the complexity of the Ovidian flower-symbolism: the flowering and de-flowering of innocence. The loss of innocence here is contextualised in love relationships since in *Songs of Experience* the individual flowers represent different aspects of love (Grant 334).

In Blake's 'flowery' imagination the symbolically over-burdened lilies and roses are put in the centre. In his *Dictionary Damon* several times remarks about Blake's late prophecies that the rose, the traditional symbol of love, is associated with the lily, which is regarded as the ideal state for man (Damon 240 and 351). Before his *Songs* in one of his juvenilia titled "How sweet I roam'd," a story of seduction is told and the two flowers appear together:

He shew'd me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his garden fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow. (Blake 6)

The female winged creature in the poem is trapped and imprisoned by "the prince of love" in "his golden cage" (Blake 6). The poem recalls the suffering and escaping Ovidian heroines and reminds us that while the rose, especially the red rose, is regarded as the traditional symbol of passion, in Greek culture the lilies are related to death. Besides the pagan symbolism of the flowers, we cannot forget about their Christian iconography, where the red rose either stands for Mary's, or Christ's suffering, and the white lily refers to the Blessed Virgin's angelic purity. In his *Songs of Experience* Blake relies on the rich symbolism of the rose and the lily so as to find his central flower-figure in the 'spiritual' sunflower.

In one of his rose-poems, "The SICK ROSE," a red coloured flower-figure is suffering – according to the speaker. The beautiful rose-like maiden's love is corrupted by an invisible winged creature who "[h]as found out thy bed / Of crimson joy : / And his dark secret love / Does thy life destroy" (Blake 213). The voice describing her misery seems to speculate about the rose's sickness, which may be caused by her desire, one-sided love, or pregnancy. The poem titled "The Angel" can be read as the explanation of the previous poem, where the "maiden Queen" is speaking about her secret angel-like lover. Searching for the roots of the imagery used in the poems, we are likely to think of Venus and Adonis' tragic love-story. Venus accidentally but fatefully falls in love with

Adonis, Myrrha’s son, and when the hunting boy is killed by a boar she creates the red anemone from his immortalised blood-drops:⁷

[...]she sprinkled scented nectar on
 his blood, which then fermented, even as
 bright bubbles from when raindrops fall on mud.
 One hour had yet to pass when, from that gore,
A bloodred flower sprang, [...]
 And yet Adonis’ blossoms have brief life:
 His flower is light and delicate; [...]
 Anemone – ‘born of the wind’ – because
 Winds shake its fragile petals, and they fall. (*Met* 10.731-39)

The anemone, also referred to as ‘the short-lived lily,’ is “an enduring reminder of the fate of the short-lived Adonis” (Hardie 69). Nevertheless, we should admit that Venus cannot be referred to as ‘the maiden Queen’ and the delicate anemone (cf. Greek *anemonos* as ‘wind’) hardly resembles Blake’s superb red rose. The two poems more convincingly recall a story told in ‘another’ *Metamorphoses* known as *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius; namely, Psyche’s story. Psyche, the beautiful ‘maiden Queen,’ is frequently visited at nights by her secret invisible husband, Amor, in a mysterious castle. Due to Psyche’s curiosity, the lover’s identity is revealed, and, as a consequence, the lovers lose each other. Following several trials and only after Psyche’s death, when Amor wakes her up by an immortalising kiss, can they be happy together.

Contrasted with the Ovidian and Apuleian love of gods, in the other rose-poem titled “My pretty ROSE TREE,” different aspects of human love are discussed. The poem is mostly read as a depiction of a married couple’s feelings toward each other. The man is tempted by a wonderful inspiring flower “such a flower as May never bore,” but, rejecting the offer, he remains faithful to his “rose tree” that reacts ungratefully to his ‘sacrifice’. Although the topical connection with Ovid’s work is obvious in *ars amatoria*, Blake’s poem discusses the moral issues of love, which Ovid neglects in *Metamorphoses*. In the flowery description of the “conflict between desire and duty, impulse and rules” (Grant 336), the possessive and selfish characteristic of human love is emphasised by the repetitive usage of the possessive pronoun ‘my’:

⁷ Although in the present paper I do not intend to collect all of the Biblical references to flowers, I cannot help highlighting some of the – rather exciting – parallels and coincidences. For instance, in the Bible the anemone is frequently identified with the “lily of the fields” (e.g. Matthew 6:28-29), or, the “lily of the valleys” (e.g. Canticles 2:1-2, 16) standing for the transient beauty of human life.

Then I went to *my* Pretty Rose-tree,
 To tend her by day and by night;
 But *my* Rose turn'd away with jealousy,
 And her thorns were *my* only delight. (Blake 215. Italics are mine. É.A.)

The man actually imprisons his partner who reacts accordingly – to ownership with distrust. Moreover, the girl also has something torturing of her own: *her* ‘thorns’.⁸ E. D. Hirsch asserts that the poem depicts “a double crime against the divine – the speaker’s for not following instinct, and the rose tree’s for not advocating” (253-54). On the whole, in the poem, being contextualised in human world, selfish love recalls Ovidian reminiscences as well.

The rose-tree, as a rose bush, hints at the possibility of childbearing. In *Metamorphoses* the flower related to maternal love is the lotus in the Dryope-episode. In fact, the lotus does not appear in Blake’s *Songs*, but it is mentioned in an early prophecy, *The Book of Thel*. In the prophecy, the main character, Thel, who lives in a luxurious pastoral of eternal spring, wants to know the meaning of life. In the valley of the river Adona, “the lotus of the water” flowers and later “the Lilly of the valley,” one of Thel’s alter-egos, is questioned in her self-quest. Here Dryope’s story is echoed as Thel’s troubles are caused by her innocence, that is, her ignorance of sexuality and motherhood. In *Metamorphoses*, nursing her son, from the purple water-lotus “Dryope had plucked / some blossoms to delight her infant son” when “drops of blood [...] dripped / down from the blossoms” and she was punished by being transformed into a lotus-tree (*Met* 9.342-5). Actually, Dryope’s tragedy is caused by her ignorance of other women’s suffering as the assaulted nymph Lotis’ transformed body is hidden in the lotus-flower. Besides her physical transformation, Dryope also experiences a mental one as in her last warning she asks her son not to pluck flowers, that is, she tries to defend innocent maidens from being deflowered. Although in *Thel* the motherlike figure is the Clod of Clay with her baby-worm, the appearance of the lotus, quite a rare flower in eighteenth-century poetry, calls the attention to the common *lot* of women: the loss of virginity and having children.

In *Thel* the lily basically stands for innocence and in its illustration the flower is shown as a miniature version of Thel, the unborn spirit. Similarly to the prophecy, in the song, “THE LILLY,” the flower stands for sincere purity:

⁸ The symbolism of thorns is rather complex: we can think of Christ’s suffering, or the thornless roses of Eden. In Greek mythology, the first red rose was said to appear on the earth when Venus, running to the wounded Adonis’ help, stepped into the thorns of a white rose and her blood coloured it. See more on it in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. by John Buchanan-Brown (Penguin Books, 1996), 813-15.

The modest Rose puts forth a thorn,
 The humble Sheep a threat’ning horn ;
 While the Lilly white shall in Love delight,
 Nor a thorn, nor a threat, stain her beauty bright. (Blake 215)

The lily represents here purity and not innocence as she is honestly capable of giving herself in love, which is not without sexual fulfilment. Consequently, together with its Christian and pagan connotations, the lily becomes the emblem of “the purity of gratified desire” (Johnson 169). It is placed last on the floral plate as for Blake this flower represents the ideal love: Love that is described in the flower-imagery of another song, in the *Song of Solomon*. As in the Biblical song the female speaker confesses: “I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys. As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters” (Canticles 2:1-2). In addition to its spiritual contents, the song is highly erotic and sexual, and its atmosphere echoes with the tone of the Blakean songs and the desire of the Ovidian heroines.

However, the most complex poem displaying strong Ovidian influence, is the middle one of the three songs, “AH! SUN-FLOWER.” In this song several of the above mentioned amorous figures and their flowers are haunting: Clytie, Narcissus, Hyacinthus, Proserpina, and Venus. I agree with William J. Keith, who claims that “an Ovidian metamorphosis-theory lies at the very core of the poem” (59). To be more precise, we cannot speak about a theory, rather a vision with flower-figures and images. The most obvious Ovidian episode is the one related to the flower of heliotrope that gives the central figure of the poem. In *Metamorphoses* Clytie fatefully falls in love with the Sungod, Apollo, and in her maniac longing she wastes away. After causing Apollo’s other beloved, Leucothoe’s death, in her jealous fixation, she keeps following the path of the sun in the sky day by day:

And now the nymph begins to waste away:
 [...] she touched no food, no drink; her only fare
 was dew and tears; she never left that spot;
 and all she did was stare – she watched the god,
 keeping his face in view, his path across the sky.
 [...] and weirdly pale, she changed in part
 into a bloodless plant: another part
 was reddish; and just where her face had been,
 a flower, much like a violet, was seen.
 Though held by roots that grip, forever she

Turns towards the Sun; she's changed, and yet she keeps
Her love intact. (*Met* 4.259-70).⁹

This way the sunflower becomes the emblem of desire and in the first stanza of Blake's song it also symbolises longing though a more spiritual one. At the same time the second stanza hints at the transformed and transforming figures of *Metamorphoses*, who are destined to die and suffer in their tragic love:

Ah, Sun-flower, weary of time,
Who countest the steps of the Sun,
Seeking after that sweet golden clime
Where the traveller's journey is done.

Where the Youth pined away with desire,
And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
Arise from their graves, and aspire
Where my Sun-flower wishes to go. (Blake 215)

Concerning the colour-symbolism of the poem, the sun imagery of the first stanza is mainly characterised with golden yellow, while the second with white giving the images of death – 'shrouded' and 'graves'. The dying youth and the corpse-like virgin like spirits seem to leave their graves longing for the 'golden clime'. They can be taken as spirits but, I think, they are rather flower(figure)s growing on graves and watching the sun-path together with the heliotrope. Although in "THE LILLY" Blake relies on the Christian iconography of the flower (viz. it stands for purity and the Blessed Virgin), here he mainly uses its Greek connotations, namely, the lily – that is, the *asphodelus* – is associated with death and afterlife. The Greeks believed that there was a large meadow overgrown with asphodel in Hades (mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*, XI.539, XI.573 and XXIV.13). Furthermore, they planted white asphodels near tombs, regarding them as the form of food preferred by the dead. Actually, the flower itself belongs to the family of the *liliaceae* – together with the narcissus, the hyacinth (also named as martagon lily), and the anemone (Rose 88-90).

⁹ Actually, the flower Clytie is transformed into is not the sunflower, the golden yellow *helianthus* (viz. *Helianthus annuus*), but the violet-typed lilac-blue or purplish *heliotrope*, or marigold (viz. *Heliotropium europaeum*), of which leaves always turn towards the sun. As Keith also notes, "the sunflower derives its name from its appearance, not from any habit of turning its face toward the sun. [...] In earlier centuries, however, a number of sun-like flowers were called heliotropes" (57). The English 'sun-flower' refers to the *helianthus* ('sun flower,' *helios anthus*) and not the *heliotrope*, yet the latter one is associated with the special movement of 'sun turn,' that is *helios tropein*. In Blake's song, the above mentioned botanical differences are not thematised, though, with its golden yellow colour, the *helianthus* is visualised.

The same type of flower, a lily, appears in the story of the virginal Narcissus, who is the prototype of ‘the Youth [who] pined away with desire’. He falls in love with his own beautiful reflection and in his stupefied (viz. the Greek *narke* as numb) gaze he becomes the emblem of selfish homoeroticism and unfulfilled desire in *Metamorphoses*:

Yes, Yes, I’m he! I’ve seen through that deceit:
 My image cannot trick me anymore.
I burn with love for my own self: it’s I
 Who light the flames – the flames that scorch me then.
 [...]

 If I could just split from my own body!
 The strangest longing in a lover: I
 want that which I desire to stand apart
 from my own self. (*Met* 3. 463-70)

Having realised that his beloved is his own self, he accepts his fate and his body mysteriously fades away: “They had prepared the pyre, the bier, the torches; / but nowhere could they find Narcissus’ body: / where it had been, they found instead a flower, / its yellow center circled by white petals” (*Met* 3.507-10). The today known narcissus is yellow centred – like the daffodil¹⁰ – but they were originally lily-white, and Narcissus’ death coloured the heart of the flower commemorating his beauty. Accordingly, in the episode Narcissus’ figure is only a shadow, a reflection and his disappearing body leaves a mark, a tint on an existent flower, the lily-typed asphodel.

Similarly, in Hyacinth’s story, after Apollo’s beloved had died in an accident, his blood stained the earth leaving an imprint:

[...] the blood that had
 been spilled upon the ground and stained the grass
 is blood no more; instead – more brilliant than
 the purple dye of Tyre – a flower sprang;
 though lily-shaped, it was not silver-white;
 this flower was purple. Then, not yet content,
 Phoebus [...] inscribed upon the petals his lament:
 With his own hand, he wrote these letters – AI,
 AI – signs of sad outcry. (*Met* 10.209-17)

¹⁰ The English name of the flower, daffodil, or *affodil*, is etymologically related to the Greek *asphodelus* as the original Greek word was taken into Latin as *asphodilus* which later was distorted into *affodilus* in Medieval Latin. See more on it in Keith 60-1.

The newly sprung flower with its mourning sounds is recalled in another episode of *Metamorphoses*, when the great hero, Ajax kills himself. From his blood “a purple flower sprang, the very same / that had – long since – sprung up when Hyacinth / was wounded. On the petals one can read / these letters, ‘AI-AI,’ asking us to think / of Ajax’ name and Hyacinth’s lament” (*Met* 13.394-8). Although the same flower is referred to, the latter heroic one is associated with the larkspur (*Delphinium Ajacis*), while the former flower of love with the hyacinth proper. As Barkan remarks, “the flower to which he gives his name is a sign both of his immortality and [...] his suffering is literally imprinted on the flower in the *ai ai* (or ‘alas’) that shows on the petals” (80). The hyacinth speaks in the language of mourning and tragic love, while Ai-ax/Ai-as is remembered as a ‘man of woe,’ and the fateful ‘Ai Ai’ is echoed by the Blakean ‘Ah!’ in the title of the poem. Contrasted with the imprinted and blood-stained fatal lilies, the white lily in the song “THE LILLY” remains spotless and purely bright.¹¹

The ‘pale Virgin’ cannot only be associated with Clytie, but also with all the suffering amorous maidens and nymphs of *Metamorphoses*. In the line, “the pale Virgin shrouded in snow,” Keith clearly sees a reference to the virginal figure of Proserpina (59), who “was playing, gathering / violets and white lilies” (*Met* 5.391-2). That is, she was picking snow-white asphodels in the fields of death visualised as her shroud (viz. winding sheet), when Pluto ravished her. Afterwards, she was destined to live partly in the underworld with her husband, which period is marked by the dying of nature in autumn and winter, then she spent the other two seasons happily with her mother, Ceres on the earth: “he [Jupiter] divides / the turning year into two equal portions. / Proserpina is shared by the two kingdoms / the goddess [Proserpina] is to spend six months beside / her husband [viz. Pluto], and six months beside her mother” (*Met* 5.564-568).

Obviously, besides the Ovidian references, the poem has strong spiritual connotations. The expressions of “golden clime” and the end of “the traveller’s journey” clearly refer to the end of human life hinting at the possibility of afterlife. Regarding the heliotrope and its philosophical implications, in Book 15 of *Metamorphoses* Pythagoras asserts the immortality and the reincarnation of the soul claiming “but over our soul – be sure – death has no sway: / each soul, once it has left one body, takes / another body as its home” (*Met* 15.157-9). He also speaks about the true nature of transformations:

‘There is no thing that keeps its shape; for nature,
the innovator, would forever draw

¹¹ Regarding its origin, the anemone is another lily-flower that is created from the dead Adonis’ blood *staining* the ground (*Met* 10.731-9). Furthermore, at the very beginning of Book 4 the metamorphosis of the crocus is mentioned (*Met* 4. 283-4). Both of them belong to the family of the bulbous *liliaceae* – the Greek humanised flowers.

forms out of other forms. In all this world –
 you can believe me – no thing ever dies.
 By birth we mean beginning to re-form,
 A thing’s becoming other than it was;
 And death is but the end of the old state; [...]. (*Met* 15.252-8)

With Pythagoras’ statements, the idea of metamorphosis is *altered*, and the ‘miraculous transformations’ of bodies into flowers, animals, rivers, or winds, are said to be related to nature. Accordingly, if the soul is immortal, the dead lovers’ alterations can be taken as an “untragic alternative to death” (Galinsky 61). The Blakean meaning of the sunflower given by Damon is also true with regards to the other flower-figures of *Metamorphoses*: “The sunflower, rooted in the earth yet keeping its blossom turned towards the sun, is a symbol of man’s spiritual aspirations, which cannot be attained while he is still rooted in the flesh” (390). In Blake’s song, the personified flower-figures are imprisoned by their unsatisfiable longing: Narcissus cannot fulfil his self-love, Proserpina cannot escape her sexual abuse – in their mortal form. Nevertheless, there is great power in human aspiration, which is emphasised by five expressions in the poem: ‘seeking after,’ ‘desire,’ ‘arise,’ ‘aspire,’ and ‘wishes’.

John E. Grant calls attention to the placing of the three floral poems on the same plate, and he claims that “as a group the poems evidently present a threefold vision of love [...]’earthly love, poetic love, and Human love” (333). In this context, the last poem, “The Lilly,” is the most spiritual showing that “however subject the natural body might be to force and threats, man’s spiritual body, like the Lilly, could never be essentially debased” (Grant 345). For Blake, flowers, being transient creatures, do not only stand for man’s short earthly life but, due to creative imagination expressed in the Ovidian fables or Blake’s *Songs*, they can also speak about man’s spirituality. The different kinds of lilies – narcissi, martagons, hyacinths, and loti – do not only symbolise death and afterlife, but also the spiritual connection between life and death. This is the main point where Blake departs the Ovidian flower-symbolism. In *Metamorphoses* the source of the transformed figures is always an outside divinity while Blake internalises it, emphasising that the source of spiritual transformation should be looked and found inside man.

In the last ‘flowery’ poem, “The Garden of Love,” Blake provides a rather ironic reading of the Ovidian tragic love-stories:

So I turn’d to the Garden of Love
 That so many sweet flowers bore;
 And I saw it was filled with graves,
 And tomb-stones where flowers should be; (Blake 215).

In the world of experience, where true love fails and lovers are fated, creative imagination is destined to be “lost & clouded in Fable & Allegory” (Blake 605.). According to Blake, though the idea of transformation is divinely inspired, in the heart of *Metamorphoses* the main drive of the events is selfish love and the desire for possession, that is, “*amor sceleratus habendi* [the cursed love of having] (*Met* 1.537-38)” (quoted in Lynn 32). In the fables we can read about not true visions and spiritual mysteries but allegorical commemorations over tomb-stones of lovers. In this sense the mythical narratives tell the stories of the repetition compulsion, commemorative repetitions of the dead beloved – practised in yearly festivals.¹² I agree with Harold Bloom that the flower-figures “have not escaped nature, by seeking to deny it; they have become monuments to its limitations” (140). The sunflower-song can also be read ironically, as all of the flowers/figures are imprisoned in vegetation, in their natural cycles – even the goddess Proserpina is forced to follow the order of the seasons.

Furthermore, the Ovidian gods and goddesses cannot escape their fate as “*fatum*, the agent of death” is their superior (Kajanto 18). In the above mentioned episodes, being victimised by passion, they cannot save their beloved ordained by Fate to die. As Solodow remarks, “there are plenty of gods, but no divinities,” no almighty omnipotent agents (93). Nevertheless, being immortal, they cannot accept death, and try to conquer it transforming their dead lovers into living natural entities. Venus, after his tragic death, transforms Adonis into the transient flower of love; Apollo creates a hyacinth from the dead body of his lover; Narcissus’ beauty is preserved in a flower named after him; while in the sunflower Clytie’s mortal love is immortalised. The latter episode with its love-preserving transformation, “*mutata servat* might almost serve as a motto for the *Metamorphoses*” (Solodow 183).

According to Solodow, the Ovidian metamorphosis is a process marked by continuity between the person and the transformed entity. It is a process of clarification

by which characteristics of a person, essential or incidental, are given physical embodiments and so are rendered visible and manifest. [...] a

¹² In *Ovid’s Poetics of Illusion* Hardie puts emphasis on the festivals and celebrations held yearly that were related to the myths: “Metamorphosis as a process that closes the narrative of a human life takes the place of death. But metamorphosis as product is structured according to the logic of funerary commemoration and memorialisation. The dead person himself ceases to exist, but enjoys survival of a kind, through modes of both continuity and transformation: continuity, through the memory-images stored in the minds of those who knew him in life; transformation, in the surrogate existence of funeral memorial and funeral inscription” (81). Nowadays the Greek ‘celebrate’ the day of death of the deceased relative every year and the commemoration is named ‘mnemosyne’ (cf. Mnemosyne).

change which preserves, an alteration which maintains identity, a change of form by which content becomes represented in form. (174)¹³

It seems rather difficult to provide a general definition of the specific transformations and, though this definition is applicable, it fails to emphasise one element: creativity. In the stories creative fantasy works and the transformers are artists, or creators, while – to some extent – the transformed creatures become works of art.

Although the ideas of creative transformation, the connection between the mortal and eternal, and the victory of love over fate come from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the pagan author cannot escape Blake’s Christian judgment. As he explains in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*:

In Eternity one Thing never changes into another Thing. Each identity is Eternal : consequently Apuleius’s Golden Ass & Ovid’s Metamorphosis & others of the like kind are Fable ; yet they contain Vision in a sublime degree, being derived from real Vision in More ancient Writings. [...] A Man can never become Ass nor Horse ; some are born with shapes of Men, who may be both [sic!], but Eternal Identity is one thing & Corporeal Vegetation is another thing. (Blake 607)

Actually, the tragic stories reveal “the impossibility of true metamorphosis: the outward form may change but not the eternal identity” (Damrosch 149). According to Wittreich, Blake, following the Renaissance commentators, distinguishes the allegories of the ancients and of the apostles as “they observed a fundamental difference between the classical habit of perverting truth through allegory and the Christian habit of concealing eternal truths in allegory [...]” (177). But we should admit that, as the first ‘true’ critic of Ovid, Blake concentrating on the Roman poet’s visual imagination and artistic freedom, emphasises the connection between the poetic and divine creation. Imagination is claimed to be the only power that makes a true poet as it is the divine vision (Blake 782). In his *Songs*, Blake calls the attention not only to the striking visual imagery of Ovid’s work, but also to the power of the transforming gods’ creativity. In the floral language of the introduction of his prophecy, *Europe*, Blake describes his confronting the fairy-like inspiration: “[...] as we went along

¹³ Galinsky expresses similar view: “Most metamorphoses deal with the changing of a person into something else, such as, for instance, a tree, a stone, or an animal. Regardless of the way they are brought about, such transformations often are not capricious but turn out to be very meaningful because they set in relief the true and lasting character of the persons involved. The physical characteristics of the personages are subject to change, but their quintessential substance lives on” (45).

/ Wild flowers I gather'd, & he shew'd me each eternal flower [...]” (Blake 238). That is, the imaginative eye can see that the vegetative universe hides the secret of eternity, it can see that “[t]he Vegetative Universe opens like a flower from the Earth’s center / In which is Eternity” (Blake 633).

Accordingly, my rhetorical reading ‘opens up’ the allegorical and ironical potentialities (and make them flourish) that are hidden in Ovid’s and Blake’s flower-symbolism. What’s more, I think, the Ovidian allusions are transformed and built up in the Blakean oeuvre. Here in his *Songs* sexual desire is shown sinful, but only experience can lead man to insight, only through experience man is able to reach a higher state of innocence. The Ovidian flowers cannot escape cyclical changes, yet they at least display the possibilities of some transformation/alteration. Later Blake realises the importance of cycles and speaks about the spiral of changes, the vortex, where spiritual development is possible. As Mitchell asserts, “Blake uses the word ‘vortex’ [...] because he wants an image that suggests both convergence toward a center or apex (the ‘inner being’ of the object) and doubleness, the interaction of contrary forces” as for him “vision does not travel in a straight line, but oscillates between contrary forces, converging on a moment of illumination” (Mitchell 72). In his *Songs* Blake expresses that love and desire, from the viewpoint of innocence is fatefully tragic, but it is inescapable. In *Milton* he says, “[m]en are sick with Love” (Blake 521), which echoes the sexual love-sickness of the Song of Solomon (Canticles 2:5; 5:8) (Tolley 127). In his later prophetic works Blake elaborates on the importance of passion and sexuality that is fatefully human but, regarding its origin, is also divine. That is, in human love and sexual desire the source of divine love can be traced with the help of imagination:

This world of Imagination is the world of Eternity ; it is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite & Eternal, whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & [for a small moment *del.*] Temporal. (Blake 605)

While in the transformations of the Ovidian narrative love tries to conquer fate that even the anthropomorphic gods and goddesses cannot escape, the Blakean love/passion is doomed to die so as to ‘resurrect’ in its altered version in the later works. In the name of Love, ‘flowery’ human life is shown by Blake as the labour of love; thus, he *transforms* the meaning of the maxim: *AMOR FORTIOR MORTE*.

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