

Botany as the Path to Awareness, or the Flower as Grail in Thomas Wharton's *Icefields*

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Thomas Wharton is a young Canadian writer whose first novel, *Icefields*, was published in 1995. Wharton was born in Grand Prairie in 1963 and he currently lives in Edmonton. The novel was awarded the Banff Grand National Prize for Literature, the Writers Guild of Alberta Best First Book Award and the 1996 Commonwealth Writers Prize “for best first book in Canada and Caribbean Regions.”¹ His second novel, *Salamander* (published in 2001), won the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award for Fiction. His two novels, *Icefields* and *Salamander*, have been translated into French. Wharton has also published *The Logogryph: A Bibliography of Imaginary Books* and *The Shadow of Malabron: Book One of The Perilous Realm* as well as short stories.

Icefields plunges the reader into the world of mountains, opposing the wild mountains of climbers who have to face the dangers of crevasses and abysses, to the tourists' world of National Parks that transforms the wild into an economic universe. The novel starts when one of the protagonists, Dr Byrne², falls into a crevasse. His companions get him out of it, but the novel develops from this initial accident, and above all, from the impression made on Byrne by the strange figure he saw on the walls of the crevasse when he was trapped inside the glacier. He will never know whether this vision was a hallucination provoked by the fall, a figment of his imagination or a supernatural apparition. In the course of his rescue, Byrne's rucksack, containing specimens of plants he had picked to bring back to London, falls into the crevasse. The seemingly incidental loss of these flowers plays an important role in the course of the novel.

Icefields is a novel about the way Nature writes messages that must be read and understood. If we consider writing as an activity determined by human conscience and

¹ W.H. New's *Encyclopedia of Canadian Literature* devotes an entry to Thomas Wharton, written by Rebecca Murdoch.

² Dr Byrne is a character who is supposed to have participated in a scientific expedition as a physician. Byrne decided to “put himself forward as a candidate for expedition doctor” and he also planned “to create a private botanical collection when he returned to London” (Wharton, *Icefields* 18). The novelist leads the reader on tracks fusing reality and fiction. At the end of the novel, he provides a bibliography that combines real books and a supposed article by the Japanese character to whom Byrne shows the orchid in the ultimate pages of the novel. Though he gives very precise, academic references (Kagami, Yoshiro. 1951. “Edward Bryne: a Life on Ice.”, *Journal of Alpine Exploration*. ii:6), neither the Japanese author, nor the physician, nor even the *Journal of Alpine Exploration* can be found.

will, it seems odd to suggest that Nature offers a form of writing. If, on the other hand, we consider writing as a set of signs making voices visible, then we can hear a language in Nature and see a kind of writing in its forms. The word “book” comes from the word “beech,” just as the French word “livre” comes from the Latin “*liber*” designating a part of the tree situated between the trunk and the bark. Moreover, we must not forget that Chinese writing is supposed to have been invented when an emperor, Huang Che, observed stars and the tracks of birds and animals on the sand (Jean 46). An English woman traveller in the Pyrenees, Mrs Boddington, remembered that the Chinese alphabet was discovered in the fibres of plants and the Druidic alphabet, as Robert Graves noted in his book, *The White Goddess*, was a tree-alphabet.³ All over the world, Nature provides examples not only of her connection with writing but of the fact that writing was born from Nature and its observation. Is this enough to say that Nature writes messages? A Japanese scientist, Masaru Emoto, wrote a book entitled *The Hidden Messages in Water* showing, thanks to numerous experiments that water writes messages, each crystal of water becoming a form of writing. In all the mountains of the world, rocks and ice tell us about the history of the earth,⁴ an important element in Wharton’s novel that quotes books of geology referring to ice as the archives of the earth. One may note that geography—the study of the physical characteristics of the earth—means “the writing of the land.” As David Abram writes, elements in Nature take the form of writing:

The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm. The swooping flight of birds is a kind of cursive script written on the wind; it is this script that was studied by the ancient “augurs,” who could read therein the course of the future. Leaf-miner insects make strange hieroglyphic tabloids of the leaves they consume. (95)

³ “I had found out that the word 'trees' means 'learning' in all the Celtic languages, and since the alphabet is the basis of all learning, and since (as I remembered from Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*) the Druidic alphabet was a jealously guarded secret in Gaul and Britain—indeed, its eighteen letter-names were not divulged for nearly a thousand years—well, the possession of this secret must have been something worth struggling about. I also found out that the alphabet in Caesar's days was called Boibel-Loth, because it began with the letters B.L.; and that [...] the Boibel-Loth had displaced an earlier, very similar, and equally secret Celtic alphabet, the Beth-Luis-Nion, whose eighteen letters were explained as referring to a sequence of forest trees—including the Alder. [...] Then I found that the eighteen-letter Celtic tree-alphabet could, for various reasons, be regarded as a Celtic counterpart of the eighteen-letter Greek Orphic alphabet, associated with moving trees” (Qtd. In Hatzenberger and Vincendeau 159-160).

⁴ See Robert MacFarlane on mountains as “the Great Stone Book”, in *Mountains of the Mind. A History of a Fascination* (London: Granta Books, 2003).

Thus, Nature can be seen as a page on which a multitude of living texts are continuously written, a living palimpsest telling the history of the world. All those forms of writing gave birth to our human writings. David Abram also notes that “the contemporary Chinese word for ‘writing,’ [...] also applies to the tracks of animals and the marks on a turtle-shell” (Abram 283). So, when Thomas Wharton tells the story of ice fields, superimposing his fiction on geologists’ descriptions, he appears not only as a novelist but as a nature philosopher, writing in the wake of all those who have perceived Nature’s tracery. His vision of mountains is not one of romantic communion opening onto a fusion with the natural world; rather, it is a gradual awakening to man’s presence in the world as part of a long history inscribed in the shapes of the earth to which man belongs. In a tradition inherited from the Transcendentalists’ view and from Thoreau’s philosophy and vision of the relationship between Nature and man, Wharton uses fiction to evoke the dangers threatening the natural world and to show how a tiny element from nature, a hardly visible flower, can change our perception of the world and lead to ecological awareness.

In this work of imagination based on real explorations, plants seem to play a secondary role. Yet the very scarcity of plants in a world of ice and the fact that ice preserves the living world beneath it, is highly revealing. For in *Icefields*, Wharton not only writes about creation and unveils Nature’s writing, he also explores the ecological message transmitted by flowers. Flowers are dotted throughout the novel: from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle “examin[ing] wildflowers” (148) to Byrne evoking “a garden of tiny ice flowers” (158); from ice wildflowers to tropical plants in a greenhouse; from botanical study to a legend about the birth of aurora, evoking “the king of elves and flowers” (187); and from the cut flowers placed in a vase to the final orchid. These flowers tell the story of Nature and its conservation, and, above all, of man’s awareness of the place of each natural element and his relationship to them.

The botanical list as a dream

The crevasse into which Dr Byrne falls becomes the place of creation, and he will never know whether the figure he saw there was just the effect produced by light on the ice or a supernatural vision. Before we are told that the flowers he had collected had fallen into the crevasse we learn that:

Byrne dreamed of flowers.

He breathed their scents and read the names that ran in orderly columns down the pages of his botanical notebook. Names of the flowers he had been collecting. The seeds and bulbs he had stored with their native earth in the tin specimen box he carried in his rucksack. He walked among them, he breathed and named, not knowing or caring if the scents matched the names he gave them. Flowers of snow melt, of early and full summer, of Dry August.

Western Anemone, or Chalice Flower. Glacier Lily. Wild Blue Flax. Four species of violet, three of *orchidaceae*. Flowers of the lush valleys and the high, wind-scoured slopes. Yellow Mountain Avens. Bluebell, *hedysarum*. River Beauty and Grass of Parnassus. Indian Paintbrush. (6)

Naming plants, naming things in Nature in general, has always been a way for man to order chaos. From the ancient Greek texts to the naming of plants by medieval mystics,⁵ men wanted to name the things seen in Nature. In this passage based on the scientific language of botany—with the names of plants, some of them in Latin, the list without any stylistic ornamentation, the reference to the botanical notebook—the flowers are much more than mere ornaments in the text. This short passage constitutes a whole chapter. The botanical list becomes a literary segment. Indeed, the juxtaposition of the dream about flowers and of specimens, of the breathing of their scent and the reading of their names does not separate the scientific language from the poetic one; rather, poetry is embedded in the scientific language. The flower list becomes a sort of prose poem figuring the landscapes that have given the flowers their names: “Glacier Lily,” “Yellow Mountain Avens,” “River Beauty.” The list suggests the living force of naming.⁶ Names make the plants appear as the living heart of a precise landscape. The list becomes a series of landscape paintings, ending on a plant whose name designates a painter’s tool (“Indian Paintbrush”). Also, breathing and listing are one (“He breathed and named”); the breathing of the flowers’ scent only seems to exist here because the botanist has looked for it to name it. By naming it, he creates its verbal existence and transforms Nature into a text by appropriating it. This chapter seems to suggest that Byrne and scientists like him are wrong when they name flowers with technical words instead of just smelling their scent (“not knowing or caring if the scents matched the names he gave them” (6), even confusing time and seasons through the collecting of flowers (“Flowers of snow melt, of early and full summer, of Dry August”(6)). And yet in the composition of the text, the writing means something else. The names that seem drily juxtaposed are changed into poetry. The writer recognizes the deep meaning of flower collecting when he projects the collection onto the page. Instead of appearing as cut flowers detached from their natural environment, the names give them a new poetic life.

The poetry seen in the botanical list and the character’s awareness of the association between naming and breathing pave the way for the vision of flowers as the object of a quest.

⁵ Some plants still bear the Christian vision in their names like *hypericum perforatum*, whose popular name is the one given by Christian mystics, St-John’s-Wort. The plant has become the saint’s voice, hence God’s message and voice through its name. The plant is figured as a Gospel in a way.

⁶ I would like to thank Michèle Kaltemback and the editorial team of the book *Perspectives environnementales au Canada: l’écologie dans tous ses états / Environmental Issues in Canada: the Ins and Outs of Ecology*, (Toulouse: Editions Universitaires du Sud, 2009) for allowing me to develop here some of the ideas evoked in an earlier paper (Besson, “L’écriture”).

A metaphorical green Grail

The colour green recurs in the novel like a sign. Green, the colour of the vegetable world, is also the symbolical colour of a hidden truth,⁷ that is to say of a transcendent dimension present behind the visible world; it is also the symbol of the Grail, which appears twice in the novel. It is first mentioned as one of the two visions leading Sexsmith⁸ to go to the mountains: “The second vision was the Grail” (Wharton 24). The explanation is given several chapters later, when we are told about Sexsmith’s dream of an old man holding the Grail:

That night Sexsmith dreamed an old man in rusted armour, whose long white hair flowed out behind him in the wind from the west. He walked stiffly, held up more by the creaking metal carapace that enclosed him than by his own failing strength. Carrying his sacred trust, an object shrouded under a white cloth, across the plain and into the blue mountains. [...]

Who are you [Sexsmith] asked the old man.

There were seven of us. I am the last one. We took an oath to follow the king into the west, and to keep the Grail hidden. (40-41)

The symbolism of the Grail suggests the mystical quality of Sexsmith’s expedition and the “rusted armour” the man wears recalls the image of a knight of the Round Table. Later on, Freya Becker, the photographer who plays an important role in the novel,⁹

⁷ The quest for truth is at the core of the novel. Rebecca Murdoch says about *Icefields*: “It is a novel loosely based on the European ‘discovery’ and early exploration of the Rocky Mountain Glaciers near Jasper; [...] it highlights the power of narrative itself [...] to govern the way characters and readers alike lay claim to “truth” by the way they perceive and lay claim to place” (1209).

⁸ Like Collie, Sexsmith (1871-1942) is a real character: “David Sexsmith was born in Lennox County, Ontario, in 1871, of United Empire Loyalist parentage, and came west to Manitoba, in 1890. It was here he heard such glowing tales of the north country that he moved to Edmonton, and from there travelled into the Peace River district, where he spent the years 1898 to 1901 trapping, prospecting and freighting. He eventually came back to Edmonton, where the French fur traders, Revillon Freres, employed him for a time” (*Sexsmith*). He gave his name to the town of Sexsmith, Alberta. But the expedition is based on the 1859-1860 expedition undertaken by James Carnegie who wrote *Saskatchewan and the Rocky Mountain* in 1875. Wharton constantly blurs the frontier between reality and fiction and maintains some ambivalence as to the reality of some characters, sometimes inspired by real people but mingling several stories and people.

⁹ Freya Becker is a traveller, adventurer, mountaineer and photographer. She is a fictional character partly inspired from a real character, Freya Stark, as Thomas Wharton said in an interview: “[Freya] is more journalistic and looking for ways to get a good story out of something. I just borrowed the name [from Freya Stark, “a very prominent mountaineer, but not in the Rockies”] and the sense of an independent woman going out and doing these things that were sort of shocking for a woman to do. Freya Stark was on her own on many of these travels, and it was so unusual for a white woman to go out alone in these places. So I guess I borrowed some of that for Freya Becker, the fictional character”, (Wharton, “The Iceman Cometh Across”). She dies when the summit cornice of the mountain she was climbing with Hal Rawson, one of the guides of the expedition, who is in love with her, collapses. (The novel alternates the narratives of two expeditions, a fictitious one and an allegedly real one, led previously by Sexsmith. In

describing Byrne, says: “he’s forged himself an impressive suit of armour” (192). Freya’s metaphor echoes Sexsmith’s dream and the reader may suppose that, like Sexsmith, and like the old man carrying the Grail, Byrne is a modern knight pursuing his own Grail. Byrne, who had a religious vision of things at one moment in his life—at one point he had even thought of being a priest—is metaphorically and symbolically associated with the old man in the dream. The green of the mythical Grail—it was supposed to be carved in a huge emerald—is so often alluded to that the reader sees it as a sign. There is first Sexsmith’s green scarf; then much later, Byrne finds a piece of green material in the ice and realizes that it is a part of his own scarf, which he wore when he fell into the crevasse; and Elspeth, the woman who takes care of the greenhouse in the mountains and is in love with Byrne,¹⁰ knits a green pullover for him. When Byrne comes back to Jasper years after his fall into the crevasse, “the sky outside his window is green” (244), as if the life of plants had contaminated it. And at the end of the novel, there is “the green, egg-shaped stone” held by Elspeth (267). A child had found it and given it to her to share his sense of wonder. She wants the stone to be brought back to the other side of the valley: “That’s where it belongs. For all the other boys to find” (267). The green stone must remain the Grail of all the children who discover the wonders of the mountains. The colour green speaks to us about the life of nature together with the quests of men. But all the pieces of green material woven into the text can be seen as fragile signs of human appearance bearing the colour of vegetation, as if to remind the mountaineer that the colour green has to be preserved in order for it to be seen as a living plant and not as a piece of torn material.

The colour green is there to show the potency of nature, which may be destroyed by the profit-makers who want to build a railway to allow tourists to come to the glacier. The mountain as cathedral thus appears as the sacred place from which the money-changers of the temple must be expelled.

The novel is steeped in religious imagery: the mountain seen as a cathedral, the dream of the old man carrying the Grail, Byrne saved as a child by what his mother saw as a miracle, his journey to Lourdes, the fact that at one moment of his life he wanted to become a priest, and the central angel-like figure seen in the crevasse, or the angel drawn in the snow. All these real or metaphorical religious signs suggest a mystical dimension in the relationship between Byrne, the ice field, and the presence of life in death. The religious imagery is there to insist on the transcendental value given to the natural world through the simple observation of a presence. For instance, observing the presence of a flower gives access to a form of spirituality, through the mystery visible in the shape of

fact it is only partly real as the name of the explorer—James Carnegie—is changed into another real name, the name of a man who travelled in the area but never made such an expedition).

¹⁰ Elspeth Fletcher is an independent woman who arrived from Inverness in 1910 and is in charge of the greenhouse in Jasper. She welcomes Dr Byrne to the greenhouse.

a frail plant. Just as in Coleridge's poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," where the killing of the albatross marks both a breakdown in the universal order and the beginning of awareness, the tiny flower under threat from the world of tourism is nevertheless the key to ecological consciousness. Flowers obsessively remembered are the botanist's Grail. Byrne did not devote his life to botany but botany scattered signs before him, speaking about life in death: the orchid growing where no orchid should grow; or the dead girl seen in a dream in the doctor's cabinet, who starts moving and then walking and when she opens the door to go out, lets the "sunlight [pour] in" (246). It is as if the orchid revealed that, just as the apparent fixity of the ice is movement, death is not the ultimate stage. The angels, regularly appearing in the novel as ephemeral figures (on the ice wall or in the snow), paint a poetic picture of a mystical vision of the imagination, finally made visible through the real life of an orchid. The examples of life following real, onerous, or apparent death are manifold, from Byrne being saved from the crevasse to Freya who, after her death, goes on living through the photographs she has taken. It is a dream once again that reveals an image of resurrection when the dead girl stands up and goes out of the room. The various dreams and the religious metaphors accompanying them, suggest that death is never definitive—a concept demonstrated by the orchid lost in the crevasse that mysteriously reappears at the end of the novel, like "something extraordinary," a truth that must remain hidden, since Byrne will only speak about it to the Japanese alpinist.

When Freya remembers the dream of a girl near a hawthorn, she also situates her perception of things in an in-between space, the mystical value of the white flowers of the hawthorn suggesting light and its thorns suggesting suffering and passion. Indeed, the hawthorn is a sacred plant often depicted as marking the limits of a sacred space.¹¹ But it is also a simple vegetable element suggesting that truth dwells in the presence and the survival of the green world.

Moreover the hawthorn is a symbol of life and resurrection linked to Joseph of Arimathea, who had given his own tomb for Christ's burial. A legend says that later on, he was sent to Britain and built the first church in England at Glastonbury. The legend fuses the Christian story of Christ's death and resurrection and the Celtic myth of the quest for the Grail: it tells that after the destruction of the monastery of Glastonbury by a fire in 1184, the monks discovered a wooden coffin and on the leaden cross there was an inscription reading that King Arthur was buried there. Two burettes containing Christ's sweat and blood were found in the same place. They were believed to be the Grail that King Arthur had looked for. The presence of Joseph of Arimathea there was proved, according to the legend, by a miraculous hawthorn growing at Weary-all Hill above Glastonbury. It is said that this hawthorn grew from the stick that Joseph of

¹¹ Jacques Brosse noted that it was already a sacred tree for the Greeks, the Romans and the Celts (320).

Arimathea had planted and that it blossomed every year on the day before Christ's birthday. Nowadays there are still hawthorn shoots blossoming in that place (Brosse 319-320). Thus the hawthorn is both a bright image of vegetable life and a spiritual sign reminding the reader of the Grail and of resurrection. The religious metaphor is there to lead the reader to see flowers and plants like a new Grail, an image of perfect life overcoming death. To do this, the flower must escape the violence of the money-changers of the Temple (the tourist industry) who want to exploit the mountain that is compared to a "cathedral." The religious imagery does not mean that Wharton's admiration for Nature is religious but that the green world must be respected like a sacred object, whose living presence must be recognized even in a frozen world, the icy coldness of which evokes death. The religious metaphor thus suggests an active form of contemplation through a sort of spiritual ecology or ecological spirituality. Indeed, both spirituality and ecology highlight respect for the world around us that gives us life; and this emphasizes our close link with Nature.¹²

Botany as a quest

In *Icefields* the world of botany is often associated with dream and memory as when Byrne can see England through the memory of the botanical gardens at Kew for example:

Drifting back to England in his dreams.

The memory of visits to the botanical gardens at Kew, out of the city haze and into a fragrant, tidy wilderness. Marvelling at flowers grown from the specimens collected by David Douglas and other early-scientific explorers of the Rockies. In the humid glass cathedral of the Alpine House he leaned forward and breathed their delicate scents. (16-17)

The memory of botanical gardens allows him to pass from the world of dreams to that of a spiritual reconstruction of space as the Alpine House becomes a "glass cathedral," very different from the "glass mountain" evoked later, the former being an artificial place leading to a mutilation of nature, the latter representing real transparency, revealing genuine nature. The religious architecture used to describe this human construction metaphorically is here to reveal the double characteristic of the place, which contains sacred objects, for the flowers collected and preserved are sacred to the botanist's eye; and yet, that new form of sacredness has the frailty of glass. The botanical gardens at Kew can be seen as the starting point of the quest.

¹² The Bible and Parables use several examples borrowed from the vegetable world, like the mustard seed, wheat and rye grass or the vine, among others, showing that Nature (and particularly vegetation) shows us the way.

“Among the flowers at Kew,” while listening to Professor Collie, who asked him to find a lost mountain, he “formed his own unstated plan: to create a private botanical collection when he returned to London, grown from the field specimens he would gather during the search for Collie’s lost mountain” (18). One may recall René Daumal’s imaginary quest for the Mont Analogue although this refers to the quest of real alpinists as the character, Collie, is one of those real men who wrote the narrative of their expeditions (Stutfield and Collie). The memory of the botanical garden suggests a quest mingling imagination and reality, the botanical world being at the centre of that quest.¹³ “Perhaps one of these days he would even see some of his own flowers blossoming here along the lofty aisles at Kew” (18). The botanical collection is clearly associated with the theme of the quest, that of a lost mountain that might reveal rare flowers able to bloom far from their environment, a living picture of the lost world found again.¹⁴

The quest will also be the quest for the flowers lost in Byrne’s fall. “The flowers, Byrne said. The guide had no choice. He couldn’t free you without cutting away your kit” (7). The rucksack with the flowers in it saved Byrne from falling deep into the crevasse; but the flowers remained entombed in the glacier in their double human prison (the tin boxes and the rucksack). At the end of the novel, when Byrne sees the orchid, like an apparition (273), he understands that the flower he had picked and lost in the glacier has been protected and preserved by the ice and has managed to settle in new hostile ground, to grow and to bloom. It is as if chance and nature together had demonstrated that man should not uproot natural elements and that nature, once freed from human hand, could live on in any conditions. If we look closely at the various references to flowers in the novel, we may note that they first appear in a dream, then through their loss in the crevasse; then there are the tropical flowers in the greenhouse and finally, the orchid. An orchid was already mentioned in the dream; so the structure of the novel reveals that the dream has become reality because the ice has preserved the flower once it has been freed from human hand—the rope linking them is symbolically cut to save Byrne even as it frees the flowers that are apparently “lost.” Symbolically, it is only thanks to that separation that both of them, man and flower, are able to survive. The rope uniting the flowers to Byrne through the rucksack appears as a false umbilical cord: the flowers cannot survive in the artificial life offered by the botanist but only in their free life on the ice field. Their loss in the crevasse is like a second birth for the plants, perhaps symbolically revealing life in death. This can further be seen in Byrne’s name, which, according to the way it is pronounced, can be linked to burning, or, if we recall the Scottish pronunciation, to birth. When he fell into the crevasse, the botanist was both burnt—which is the impression given by the first contact with the ice—and

¹³ One is reminded of Théodore Monod’s lifelong quest for a precise flower in the Sahara desert (Monod).

¹⁴ When he lost his flowers, Byrne lost his whole world.

born, as that fall will trigger a new awareness of life as revealed by Nature. The flowers, preserved by the mountain “cathedral,” will also come back to life. Being sacred to the botanist, they will reveal to him that their true sacredness dwells in their union with the glacier.

Yet Byrne lived that event as a terrible loss: “Still mourning your lost treasures, I suppose. That’s the thanks I get.’ ‘I always kept the seeds and bulbs with me, but I didn’t want you to know that at the time’” (69). However, what appears as a loss is the message of life preserved in the ice. The detail provided by Byrne of “the seeds and bulbs” he kept contains the promise of a possible life. It is significant that it did not keep just any part of the plants: it is the seeds and bulbs that enable plants to grow and survive. When he finds the orchid at the end he understands that the promise of the flower has been fulfilled and that Nature has written the wonderful message of how the impossible may be possible in nature, how the loss was a promise of life, a life that only the attentive botanist, apt to see the most minute living flower, could discover. From the moment when Byrne’s companions cut the rope, thus causing the flower specimens to fall into the crevasse, to the moment when Byrne sees the orchid, no human intervention has been necessary. But a readjustment to any part of the plants has initiated the journey of the flower and observation has made the revelation possible. In between, only Nature has acted to change the flower’s fate; it was meant to be carried in a box to go into a museum, and finally, it became free because of a human gesture meant to save the man who had imprisoned the flower. The double coincidence of the fall and the rescuing gesture anticipates the encounter, much later, between the blooming flower and the observing eye of the botanist. Observation and wonder generate the awareness of the need to leave Nature free and wild.

Far from separating the human world from Nature, the novel shows that it is the communion between the climber and the mountain, the botanist and the flower, that suggests that the earth is shared by all the creatures and elements that compose it: men, animals, plants, rocks, and other natural elements. There is a separation between man and Nature only when man rapes Nature by constructing it as a profitable enterprise. Ecological awareness, the understanding of life in Nature and of man’s place in Nature leads to metaphysical awareness: it is when man becomes aware of what nature is and of the life it contains that he becomes aware of his place in the world and of his relationship to the universe.

From artificiality to resilience

The flowers also become a symbol of resilience when, after Freya’s death, Elspeth explains how she tried to do something that Byrne “would appreciate” by cutting some flowers for him in the greenhouse:

So I went out to the glasshouse and cut a handful of lilies and put them on a blue vase on the table. He came in, sat down at the table, looked at the lilies, and then started talking about his long lost botanical collection. The orchids and other rare flowers that he had hoped to take back to England with him, that would've earned him a place at the Royal Botanical Garden. And then he went on about the high alpine wildflowers and lichens that grew amid the bare rock. Within an apparent desert of water, soil, shelter, the resilient life that will find the merest sliver of sunlight, and bloom. (221)

The scene described by Elspeth reveals Byrne's frailty as highlighted by the flowers. The wild flowers were collected not only out of passion, but also out of pride, to "earn him a place at the Royal Botanical Garden." Two worlds are face to face: the human world of feelings and frailty evoked by Elspeth, and the vegetable world described by Byrne who speaks about "resilient life." He wanted to bring the collected flowers to England, to bring them to an artificial environment, in order to preserve them, but far from their original home, as Elspeth did in her glasshouse.

Instead of that, chance made him fall into the crevasse and the flowers returned to nature, to the eternal preservation of the ice. So when Byrne discovers the orchid at the end of the novel, he sees it as a sign of resilient life. The orchid was not brought back to the Royal Botanical Garden in England; it found a new life in the environment of the glacier—hard and hostile, but allowing the plant to live on. Similarly, the flowers Elspeth cut are twice severed from their life, because they are far from their original environment and because they are cut. They will end in the dustbin as Elspeth will drop the vase when Byrne enters. Like Byrne's specimens lost in the crevasse, it is as if flowers taken from their environment could not remain long in human hands.

In opposition to the flowers collected by the botanist and lost in the glacier after his companions saved his life (one of them reappearing, like a miracle of nature, at the end of the novel), one may now consider the tropical flowers growing in the glasshouse. In the middle of the Canadian Rockies, an artificial world of glass serves to conserve plants gleaned from remote countries and tropical climes. This glass Palace offers tourists exotic flowers taken out of their natural environment. This place has the ambiguity of the transparency it is made of a transparency allowing tropical life to be seen in a world of ice where such plants do not normally grow. After the "glass cathedral," the "garden under glass" that is Elspeth's creation (68), fuses the notion of preservation and artificiality, but it is a living artificiality. The greenhouse is an interior space built by men to preserve vegetation from the cold and to allow rare botanical species to grow:

[Byrne] remembers the tiny native flowers he collected on the expedition, the precariousness of their existence. Here in this garden, sealed off from the glacial winds, are giant, unabashed blossoms from Europe, India, the Pacific Islands. *Camellia ficitillia* growing next to hyacinth. (68)

Byrne's observations highlight the close proximity of flowers coming from different parts of the world. In the text, this is reflected in the juxtaposition of the scientific Latin term with a popular term, and the proximity of the past of his memory represented by the tiny flowers he collected to the present of his visit to the greenhouse with its prestigious flowers preserved from "glacial winds." Yet the story will highlight a face to face between two kinds of preservation: the conservation of these multiple species evoking the whole world kept in a glasshouse and the preservation of one unique flower by the ice of the glacier. Byrne's observation of the exotic flowers in the greenhouse is seen in terms of display and cost ("the effort, the likely cost of such a display, astounds him," (68)) whereas the orchid discovered at the end of the novel is seen as something "extraordinary," a sort of Grail found in the little flower.

The greenhouse, situated as it is in an environment that is hostile to the plants it preserves epitomizes all human constructions built in wilderness areas in order to transform the original landscapes into new worlds designed for tourists, thus opposing the language of profitability to that of Nature. The orchid growing in an extraordinary manner where it should not, is the tiny sign offered to the mountaineer to enable him to understand his relationship with nature. The "resilient life" Byrne sees in nature allows him to find resilience in the discovery of the orchid after Freya's death.

The orchid as the path to awareness

The orchid is first seen as "a mote of colours [that] appears at his feet" (273). Its identity then reveals something beyond botanical identification:

Peeking out between the halves of a shattered stele of limestone, a tiny purple-pink flower, *Orchidaceae*. The petals tremble in the icy wind.

An exceedingly delicate and lovely flower.

Quickly he takes note of sexual characteristics, number of petals, the single ovate basal leaf. There can be no doubt. *Calypso bulbosa*. The Calypso Orchid or Venus' Slipper.

He kneels in the cold muck.

An orchid. His scientific understanding contracts. Orchids do not grow here. Nothing grows here. The unceasing collision of ice and rock grinds away all life. Nothing can survive at the terminus. (273)

The scientific language and rational thought clash with the absence of logic in nature, the logical impossibility of the presence of such a flower in such a place, that flower which is there nevertheless. The clash is figured in the text by the italics of the scientific name next to the standard characters used for the popular name containing mythological references (Calypso or Venus). The catalogue of names and mythological references constitutes a sort of over-naming, as if the botanist wanted to persuade himself of the existence of the flower at that place by obsessive naming. The strict scientific language is

associated with a short sentence in italics, isolated like the orchid among the rocks and ice, and evoking its beauty in simple terms (“*an exceedingly delicate and lovely flower*”). Moreover, the position of the botanist in the process of closely examining the flower is also the position of a man praying: “He kneels.” The action would be quite logical were it not for the deliberate isolation of that short sentence from the rest of the text. In the context of the aesthetic, emotional vision of the flower, it takes on a spiritual dimension. A vegetable Grail found in the ice. Probing into the ground Byrne tries to find a scientific explanation given by nature: “There must be organic nature of some kind beneath the surface” (273). What he finds is the “remains of a tin specimen box.” It is as if the flower had been liberated from the box in which it had been kept by the botanist—who does not see himself as a botanist—to start a new life in a place where it seemed impossible for such a flower to grow: “Nothing can survive in that terminus.” For the mountaineer, the orchid becomes something that must not be unveiled to the wider public; it remains a secret that he is going to share with the Japanese mountaineer only. The novel ends on this sentence: “I want to show you something rather extraordinary” (274). It is a hidden secret revealed to the nature lover, the botanist who can read the true meaning of the flower’s name in the name he obsessively gives. *Calypso Bulbosa*...The scientific name added to the extraordinariness of the instant act as a revelation. “Calypso,” before being the nymph in love with Ulysses in *The Odyssey*, is a Greek word meaning “concealment.” The scientific name reveals the relationship between the angel-like figure seen by Byrne in the crevasse and the orchid lost with the other specimens in his fall and discovered at the end of the novel. Two ways of writing nature and two expressions of nature are separate yet combined in the scientific name.

In order to depict the coloured landscape mingling stones and plants, Wharton chose the metaphor of the garden to evoke a kind of esoteric text written by nature, a “bewitching garden of signs” (141). In this world where nature tells stories, the angel-like figure Byrne sees when he falls into the crevasse can be interpreted as an allegory of the human imagination created by the encounter between the images of nature and man’s perception of them. It reveals a hidden energy in the ice: the human imagination preserved by the ice.

For Tyndall, a greater mystery than glacial dynamics was the human imagination. From *a few scattered observations* it had dared to reconstruct the prehistory of the world. Was imagination, he wondered, an energy *locked like latent heat in ancient inorganic nature?*

Or rather, Byrne wrote in his journal, was it a power that overflowed from some unseen source, passing inexorably forward to enclose and reshape the world?

And with that thought, a fact he had always known and yet ignored rose into the light of significance. Glaciers are rivers. Water. (169)

Scientific observation leads man to see imagination as a physical force imprisoned in the natural world. It is that scientific vision that generates the poetry of the visual

representation in the crevasse; it appears as an image of poetic creation hidden in the heart of the earth and preserved by the ice. It awaits the human gaze to exist as a creation. The image draws its strength and its existence from nature and it is scientific perception that unveils it through the imagination: poetry thus emerges from the organic. In the same way, the orchid needs both Byrne's eyes and the association between his discovery and the knowledge of its scientific name to deliver its message; before that, it has survived only by remaining hidden. This points to the danger that the mass exploitation of natural riches might represent for such natural treasures.

The name of the orchid mentioned by the botanist, *Calypso Bulbosa*, also evokes a hidden thing as this orchid can only grow when it is sheltered or hidden. Symbolically it also shields within it the mystery of life preserved by the ice that should have killed it. Thus preserved, its message can be later revealed to the eyes of the mountaineer. The naming of the flower and the immaterial figure on the ice walls are two ways of speaking about the energy of life contained in nature: one of them is a projection of the imagination or a supernatural vision, the other is the most fragile example of vegetation growing in hostile places. Both must be preserved to keep the secret of life safe. The botanist understands this while understanding also the necessity of keeping the crowds of tourists far from those fragile places. If the original garden is uprooted, the fragile "glass mountain" could be shattered. The orchid could only survive because it was sheltered, that fragile life can live on only if the secret of its life is preserved, only if the flower may remain the reflection of its name; a secret that only people who are aware of its value can see.

What makes the end of the novel "extraordinary" is the small flower coming from elsewhere and having succeeded in growing in extreme conditions among rocks and ice. While many exotic flowers growing in the greenhouse and named by Byrne were "sealed off from the glacial winds" (68), the unique orchid's "petals tremble in the icy wind" (273). The "icy wind" echoes the "glacial wind", underlining the resistance of this tiny piece of vegetation to the extreme climate it has to face. It is as if Wharton wished to demonstrate the need to protect its fragile yet strong presence, not by building false glass constructions but by letting it grow in its own free world.

Byrne hides the orchid from everyone but the Japanese alpinist and after having over-named it, he seems to refuse to name it to anyone else when he describes it only as "something extraordinary;" and in this refusal to project scientific language onto the natural object, in the public eye at least, we can see the refusal to appropriate Nature, which lies at the heart of ecological writing and indeed of the notion of ecology itself. In the last line of the novel the act of naming is refused. The categorization that transforms nature into a scientific list where life has disappeared is no longer used when Byrne understands that the small flower speaks to those who can see it about the strength of nature and the need to conserve it. An accident provoked the fall of the specimens

imprisoned in Byrne's boxes; chance provoked an unnatural wonder of nature in the form of a little flower that has survived in the ice. By freeing itself from the box, the plant has succeeded in surviving in the most hostile environment, proving that life was possible even where it seemed impossible, provided that the wilderness remains free from all human constructions.

The orchid becomes an inexpressible image and it is the new refusal to name the flower "something" that becomes a message. The ice of the Canadian mountains enables us to hear a poetic language in its silence. Ecology is really at the source of imaginary creation here. The fact that the flower should be seen as an apparition, as something "extraordinary," that under normal circumstances, should not have appeared in such a hostile environment, makes it a sort of miracle. The spiritual dimension of the discovery is emphasized by the position of the botanist, kneeling beside the flower, and the mystery surrounding it. In the real garden mirrored by a cosmic garden, Wharton reveals the relationship between the earth and the whole cosmos, a relationship that the vegetable world discloses. To "the many-coloured constellations of lichen growth" (140) corresponds a "space [that] blooms with stars" (157). A cosmic garden echoes the lichens becoming constellations, following the poet Francis Thompson, "that thou canst not stir a flower / Without troubling a star" ("The Mistress of Vision" XXI). The perception of the "shaping force of climate and geology," in Claire Omhovère's words (15), together with that "bewitching garden of signs" (141) and the landscape appearing "as a text to be deciphered" as Michèle Kaltemback put it (Kaltemback, *Lectures* 25) lead to awareness. The text also explores the predatory relationship of man to nature when he wants to make a Park of the wilderness and to change a wild ice field into a false tropical garden imprisoned on the free space of the mountain.

In a world where technology and the profit motive threaten wildernesses everywhere on the earth, we can wonder whether a work of fiction can help conserve the natural world. In other words, has literature the power to modify a certain transformation of the world? Scott Slovic writes that "the development of new technologies and the evolution of new processes of social change have altered the role of the written word—of literature—in American culture and in similar societies around the world in recent years" (Satterfield and Slovic 273). Does Thomas Wharton's novel not demonstrate that a work of imagination, fragile as it may seem in a society based on profitability, can act as a stimulus and lead to people's awareness and that a work of fiction may have as much impact on the conservation of endangered nature as a small orchid found in the vast wilderness has on the mountaineer's conscience? Revealing a modern form of spirituality seen in nature, the natural world becomes a sacred place and the quest for the botanical Grail opens out onto the awareness that the salvation of nature and of man in nature may come from the abandoning of human constructions built in opposition and not in union with nature. The conservation of tropical flowers in a

greenhouse situated on a glacier is opposed to the survival of an orchid growing freely on the same glacier. It is up to man to understand where nature and life dwell.

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