

Article

From Folklore to Proust: A Quest across Symbolic Universes

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Abstract: This study explores the intersection of folklore and literature, specifically examining how a methodology developed for interpreting wondertales can be applied to a complex literary corpus, such as Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). The discussion proposes a case study for the use of allomotifs, or interchangeable motifs, to understand symbolic patterns in Proust's literary work. The paper lays bare a widespread metaphorical field in wondertales, then follows its complications in the Proustian corpus. It suggests that Proust's œuvre, much like folklore, operates within a symbolic universe where binary oppositions, such as good and evil or male and female, are fluid and dynamic. The discussion shows that Proust's literary imagination aligns surprisingly well with the workings of folklore. This hybrid space of the imagination challenges conventional distinctions between folklore and literature, and brings to mind Lévi-Strauss' erstwhile ruminations on the *pensée sauvage*.

Keywords: folklore; Marcel Proust; allomotifs; metaphor; symbols; androgyne; initiation; coming of age; flower metaphors; homosexuality; Snow White; Sleeping Beauty; Brothers Grimm

Introduction

The following discussion unfolds between and betwixt folklore and literature. The rather obvious distinction between these two domains may hinge on one crucial feature. In folklore, anyone can pick up a story and spin new variants as they please, whereas literature is the domain of authorial texts, protected by copyright laws, which become frozen the moment they are finished. Yet, there is a fascinating grey zone where the two poles mingle (Hafstein 2014). This study dwells in that twilight zone.

My aim, put in a nutshell, is to check whether an approach to interpretation devised in the realm of fairy tales (or wondertales, a term I prefer) could be useful regarding a complex literary corpus. Taking its cue from the workings of folklore, this approach works through variation. The gist of the matter is that wondertales are quite stable (they fit in roughly four hundred and fifty enduring tale types, Uther 2011), yet are retold in ever-different variants. The big question is, then: how do tales persist through ever-changing variants? Folklorists have been perplexed, as is their wont, and several explanations have been proposed (see Vaz da Silva 2023, pp. 70–72). One thing is for sure: a story will endure through myriad retellings if its variants use interchangeable, roughly equivalent, images. Alan Dundes coined the term allomotifs for such equivalent motifs in different variants. He pointed out that if several motifs can fill the same symbolic slot in a tale—if the story works with any of them—then a comparison of the allomotifs should clarify what is the shared idea they convey. Take note that this approach differs from looking up folktale motifs listed in, say, the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (Thompson 1955–1958). Whereas perusing motifs in lists would take us no closer to understanding any of them, comparing allomotifs entails asking on what grounds they are equivalent, which opens the way to figuring out their meanings. Using this approach, Dundes (2007, p. 319) proposed, one could “unlock the secrets of symbolism in folklore, and moreover unlock them in a way that is replicable”.

I suggested using a tailored mode of this comparative method to grasp the symbolic universe of a tale, a group of tales, or even of wondertales as a genre (Vaz da Silva 2023, pp. 67–85). Because this approach should work wherever theme-and-variations patterns



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are to be found, I have experimented with Renaissance and folk art bearing on Christian themes (Vaz da Silva 2004, 2010). Alas, literature would seem to be out of reach. The realm of locked texts appears to be immune to the theme-and-variations vortex of successive recreations, hence impervious to the approach of comparing variants to grasp the underlying conceptual meshwork.

However, some writers bring nuance to this negative conclusion. The Proustian corpus, for one, resonates with the theme-and-variations universe of folklore. There is, first, the massive fact that Marcel Proust addressed a small set of themes in various guises throughout his work. Second, Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, henceforth *Recherche*) often splits ideas into bits and pieces he scatters along the plot line, a procedure that encourages readers to join the dots—in effect, comparing variants—to make sense of unfolding themes. And then, there is a serendipitous third factor. Because we are lucky enough to have some of Proust’s manuscript sketchbooks available for scrutiny, it is possible to follow variations on themes as Proust (again and again) rewrote his scenes. These variation factors make it possible to look at Proust through the prism of textual variations.

In addition, Proust operates intertextually by using, e.g., Darwin, Shakespeare and Walter Scott (Eells 2000, pp. 338–45) as well as the *Thousand and One Nights* (Miguet-Ollagnier 1993), Ruskin (Eells 2020a, 2020b), Saint-Simon, and others to think metaphorically. I will sparingly tap this intertextual dimension in the following argument, which focuses on suggesting that comparing Proustian variants is the same sort of procedure as comparing wondertale variants and yields the same sort of results. The layout of my story, like that of any decent fairy tale, is ternary. I will lay bare a particular metaphorical field in wondertales, then follow its complications in the Proustian corpus, to finally venture some thoughts on the continuity found between folklore and a literary masterpiece. (All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.)

Beyond Good and Evil

The adaptation of folktales into children’s literature by the Brothers Grimm (Tatar 1987), and then the commoditization of fairy tales by the Disney studios, probably account for the preconception that wondertales are about good and evil. Such commonsense ideas are good enough to get by, and we tend to stick to them for simplicity’s sake. But in scholarship, as in literature and art, puncturing the commonsense bubble is required to investigate reality—to borrow from Proust (1988a, pp. 15, 694), it takes dispelling a preconception to behold what was there, unseen, right before one’s eyes.

Consider an infamous instance of fairy-tale evil incarnated. The queen in “Little Snow-White” hated her daughter, ordered that she be murdered, then plotted alternative ways to kill Snow White—a trend that culminated in the offering of the poisonous apple. No wonder that the Brothers Grimm (drawing on other variants they knew) soon turned the bad mother into a stepmother. But the queen’s attention-grabbing exploits overshadow a symbolic pattern discernible in the intertextual space of variants. First, recall how the story starts:

In the middle of winter, when snowflakes were falling like feathers from the sky, a beautiful queen sat at a window with a black ebony frame, and she was sewing. And looking at the snow, she pricked her finger with the needle, and three drops of blood fell on the snow. And because the red looked so beautiful on the white, she thought: “if only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as this window frame”. And soon she had a little daughter as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as ebony, who therefore was named Snow White. (Grimm 1812, p. 238; cf. Zipes 2014, p. 170)

And now consider a few variants mentioned in the Grimms’ note to the tale. In one variant, a count and a countess drove their coach past three heaps of white snow and three pits filled with red blood; then three black ravens flew by. The count wished he had a girl as white as the snow, as red as the blood, as black as the crows—and behold, they met such a girl. But the countess chose to abandon her, and the forsaken girl soon came to the

dwarfs' cave. Another text specifies that the dwarfs kill every maiden who approaches them, and for this reason the stepmother took Snow White there. A third variant recounts that the queen took Snow White into the forest, asked her to gather a bunch of beautiful roses, and abandoned her (Grimm 1812, pp. XXXII–XXXIII; cf. Zipes 2014, pp. 493–94). Also noteworthy is a detail left unchanged ever since the first manuscript version of the text: Snow White bit into the apple “where it was red” before dropping unconscious (Rölleke 1975, p. 250).

From these variants, three ideas stand out. First, the girl is defined by red (and black) besides being white. Second, red is associated with blood. Third, the (step)mother provides the protagonist with something red. Blood, then? Yet another variant, which states that the queen was peeling an apple when she cut her finger and bled, upholds the association between apples and blood (Grimm 1812, p. XXXII; cf. Zipes 2014, p. 494). At this point, a word about the girl's trichromatic definition is apposite. She starts life “snow white” (her given name), then goes on to collect roses and/or to bite the red part of an apple, then falls into slumber in a dark chthonian abode, before the prince enters the scene. Put in a nutshell: white, red, and black express the tripartite span of the girl's maturation (see Vaz da Silva 2013; 2023, pp. 135–36).

The Flower Metaphor

What about collecting roses? Do the flowers connote blood as well? Before I answer, a word on conceptual metaphors is in order. I take my cue from George Lakoff's point that “the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another”. A metaphor is broadly “a cross-domain mapping in the conceptual system”, whereas metaphorical expressions in language are but “the surface realization of such a cross-domain mapping” (Lakoff 1993, p. 203). I venture to add that fairy-tale images offer their own realizations of cross-domain mappings. On that understanding, we are ready to discuss the image of a girl collecting roses.

An eloquent sixteenth-century Italian tale features a girl named Biancabella (White Beauty) who, on her tenth summer, found a garden full of roses and other beautiful flowers—“a place her mother called her own garden”—and strolled into it. After gathering flowers there, she was washed in rose water, and started yielding roses, violets, and all kinds of flowers. Soon, her father celebrated Biancabella's betrothal with a mighty king (Straparola 2012, vol. 1, pp. 424–27). This story conveys the notion that menarche entails acquiring flowers, which brings home the insight that it is because maidens are figuratively in bloom that shedding their menarcheal blood amounts to (as the common saying goes) “defloration”. Shakespeare sums it up as he describes a virgin as “a fresh uncropped flower” destined to lose her “roses” (*All's Well That Ends Well* 4.2.18, 5.3.320).

Per this pervasive metaphor, Biancabella's access to a rose garden her mother called her own hints that the girl is coming of age. She is stepping into the phase when maidens are metaphorically in bloom—when they are *jeunes filles en fleurs*, as the French put it. The scene of the queen leading Snow White to collect roses pertains to this coming-of-age metaphor, which is why it is equivalent to biting a red apple. The two images are allomotifs; they align as signifiers for menarche.

Death-and-Rebirth Themes

Now consider how another tale conveys differently the selfsame coming-of-age tripartite scheme. The Grimm variant of *Sleeping Beauty*, “Little Briar Rose”, recounts that twelve fairies grant a little girl brilliant social graces, then the uninvited thirteenth fairy condemns the girl to prick her finger on a spindle and die; however, the other fairies convert death into slumber. In Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* movie, this ternary process is even more apparent. First, two fairies grant beauty and song to the little princess, then Maleficent curses her to prick her finger and die, and finally the third fairy attenuates the foretold death into a long sleep (Geronimi 1959). Notice that blood comes associated with finger pricking at

age fifteen. And the association with a spindle further enhances the overall meaning of the episode:

One of the activities most commonly ascribed to the moon is that of spinning and weaving. . . . The moon is a spinster in innumerable folk-tales in Germany and in Italy. . . . The traditional attitude of the Moirai, Parcae, Norns is shared with them by goddesses and moon deities the world over. (Briffault 1927, vol. 2, pp. 624–25)

The point is that the offshoot of the fating scene—pricking a finger on a spindle—hints at a lunar theme. Both turning a spindle and bleeding are apposite markers for one who starts cycling along with the moon phases. Bruno Bettelheim (1978, p. 232) was right as he recognized that the curse refers to menstruation; more exactly, menarche is the issue. What the motley witchy older women—the maleficent (step)mother of “Little Snow White”, the uninvited fairy in “Little Brier Rose”, Maleficent in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi 1959)—bestow on their younger counterparts is the lunar gift of fertility (Vaz da Silva 2023, pp. 113–18).

Back to the point that considering variants makes it easier to behold what was there, unseen, we realize that ostensibly evil characters perform beneficent functions. This insight is actually not new. The Disney studios insightfully revised their assessment of the evil fairy in *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014). More fundamentally, Vladimir Propp noted in his *Morphology of the Folktale* that fairy-tale hero(in)es quite often acquire the powers they need from hostile creatures (Propp 1996, p. 42). In his words, “the witch plays the role of an involuntary (and even unwilling) helper. She begins as an antagonistic donor and then becomes an involuntary helper” (p. 81).

What was there unseen, then, is a vast set of variations on coming of age. This theme consists in dying to a former condition; enduring a time of dissolution and regeneration (enchantment); and being reborn to another stage of life. As Mircea Eliade (1998, p. 202) put it, the fairy tale repeats on the level of the imagination the exemplary initiation scenario made up of an unbroken series of “‘ordeals,’ ‘deaths’ and ‘resurrections’”. Because this death-and-rebirth pattern entails that enduring hardship is a condition for progress, aggressors regularly turn out to fulfill useful functions. Hence, grappling with the complexity of the materials entails acknowledging that unsavory characters are hybrid—they are both “evil” and “good”.

From Tradition to Literature

Comparing allomotifs in variants reveals metaphorical patterns in tales, or so I have suggested. Might this approach be deployed beyond traditional realms? The answer boils down, I think, to whether it is possible to access an intertextual space in literary works from which to probe an author’s thinking. I take Proust as a case study because his oeuvre offers textual variants in a satisfyingly complex landscape. As a point of entry into this universe, I start with a procedure Proust often uses to obliquely convey ideas: he returns to a given theme at different points in the plot, each iteration illuminating the others, which invites readers to join the dots beyond the plot level. I choose a striking, self-contained example for simplicity.

A scatological bent in the Guermantes family provides the occasion. On a social reception, described in *The Way by Swann’s*, Oriane de Guermantes chats with her longtime friend Charles Swann concerning the family name Cambremer. This is a rather startling name, she says, in that “it ends just in time, but it ends badly!” Swann sees the point and replies: “It begins no better”. Oriane agrees: “Indeed, that double abbreviation!” Likely, Swann replies, the work of “someone very angry and very proper who didn’t dare to finish the first word”. But, Oriane responds, “since he couldn’t stop himself beginning the second word, he’d have done better to finish the first one and be done with it”. She concludes: “our jokes are in really charming taste, my dear Charles” (Proust 1987, pp. 335–36; this translation borrows from Proust 1992).

Charming taste or not, what are the two friends talking about? What may be the double abbreviation that causes “Cambremer” to end badly and begin no better? What is,

in short, their private joke? It is perhaps not too hard to guess what word the final “mer” might be a beginning for. But what other word could the initial “Cambre” possibly indicate?

Readers not privy to the code informing this exchange must wait until late in *The Guermantes Way*, where another scene—again featuring Oriane—offers more information. The duchess of Guermantes, brimming with wit, provocatively proffers that Émile Zola is a poet rather than a realist writer; indeed, he magnifies everything he touches! And if it be countered that he touches nothing but. . . what brings luck (i.e., crap), then one must acknowledge that he makes of it something colossal—“he makes the dung heap epic! He is the Homer of the sewers!” Then comes the capital sentence: “He hasn’t enough capital letters to write the word of Cambronne”, meaning that in Zola’s writing there cannot be too much emphasis on that word. A rather dim lady ventures to say: “he writes it with a big ‘C’”. To which Oriane condescendingly replies: “Surely with a big ‘M,’ I think, my dear” (Proust 1988b, p. 789). The point is clear: *le mot de Cambronne*, associated with dung and sewers, amounts to the M word. The narrator himself confirms Oriane’s lesson in *The Prisoner* as he recounts that Morel decided to dump Jupien’s daughter and run, leaving Jupien and Charlus to hash it out (*se débrouiller*) among themselves; but Morel used a more *cambronesque* verb, the narrator notes (Proust 1988a, p. 700)—by implication, *se démerder*. And the baron of Charlus, Oriane’s cousin, near the end of *Sodom and Gomorrah* spells out the reading that Oriane implied in her chat with Swann: Cambremerde (Proust 1988a, p. 475).

At length, it becomes clear that Oriane and Swann shared the fanciful notion that the family name “Cambremer” articulates the beginning of two synonym words—*le mot de Cambronne* plus *merde*—to spectacular scatological effect. My own point is that the assumptions shared by Oriane and Swann—plus Charlus, plus Marcel—become clear only if one joins dots to be found scattered along the plot. Granted that most French readers would know that *le mot de Cambronne* stands for *merde* (as the legend has it, during the battle of Waterloo, General Cambronne responded to the Duke of Wellington’s demand of surrender with the M word), my point is that Proust conveys certain meanings sotto voce, by dint of thematic variations along the narrative axis rather than by explicitly stating them. Therefore, comparing variants should provide paths for clarifying meanings in Proust’s œuvre.

Say It with Flowers

Consider a scene from an unfinished project that features several early sketches (quite autobiographical still) of salient themes in the *Recherche* (Clarac 1971, pp. 980, 983). In this episode of *Jean Santeuil*, Jean goes on a stroll with an intimate friend, Henri Réveillon, to an isolated valley. Upon finding a secluded spot where he cannot see Henri—a place so silent that he can hear the breathing of a butterfly perched on a flower—Jean focuses on the sight of a purple foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*).

This lonely flower brings up a few thoughts about secluded locality, and Jean feels that the foxglove is as isolated from the world as he is—in fact, he identifies with this flower to the point where he feels that to pluck it would be to touch himself. After he calls over Henri, who informs him that this plant is common—it exists in France, in Europe, in America—Jean looks at the foxglove, which is so isolated and yet is so great as a natural category, as a vast epitome of life (*comme type si vaste de la vie*). And Jean says to himself: although he often felt isolated from the world like this flower, sometimes he felt that the world, from its most distant past, is full of thoughts similar to his own; and such thoughts will exist in the future too, for which Jean has considered preserving as an offering of friendship, in a book that would be himself, a thought that would resemble theirs (Proust 1971, pp. 469–71).

It is tempting to ask: what might be the thought, quite old in the world, to be expressed in that future literary work? It would be foolhardy to seek a straight answer from this exceptionally enigmatic passage. But a related problem—why does Jean’s monologue unfold before an isolated foxglove he identifies with?—provides a path forward. That is because the foxglove supplies the first recognizable instance of a clutch of flower metaphors in Proust’s work. The task ahead, then, is to connect dots across Proust’s *œuvre* to lay bare that idiom of flowers.

In notebook sketches for *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, a never-published project that eventually developed into the *Recherche*, a prefiguration of the opening scene of *Sodom and Gomorrah* features the flower metaphor. As the narrator examines the exuberant pink flowering of a large pagoda tree (*Sophora japonica*) being pollinated by bees, he sees Monsieur de Guercy (a precursor of Charlus) coming out of his aunt’s dwelling and passing by Borniche’s (a forerunner of Jupien) flower shop. Upon seeing each other, sparks fly. Guercy, in his agitation, dishevels the rose he wears on his lapel, then somehow manages to mislay it. Ostensibly to replace the rose, he heads to the florist. Borniche offers him a rose at no charge, and soon they indulge together in the “intoxication of gossip” (Proust 2022a, pp. 1068–70; 1988a, pp. 936–37), which *Sodom and Gomorrah* clarifies as intense sexual intercourse (Proust 1988a, pp. 8–11).

Notice that Guercy seduces Borniche under the pretext of obtaining a rose, and Borniche offers Guercy the rose as a prelude to offering himself. What is more, the narrator draws a pointed parallel between the rare pink flowers of the pagoda tree, nonetheless found by incoming bees; and Borniche, representing the rare species of men who fancy older gentlemen, serendipitously found by Guercy. Bottom line: Guercy’s unexpected meeting of Borniche, his arrival at the flower shop, is like the coming of an insect to penetrate pink flowers in a nuptial conjunction (Proust 2022a, p. 1070; 1988a, pp. 936–38).

Adjacent to this scene, Proust added a short note: “The foxglove in the valley” (Proust 2022a, p. 1070; 1988a, p. 938). This retrospective pointer indicates what the foxglove means to Proust; or should I say, what the butterfly-and-foxglove scene connotes. Recall that Jean, having found a secluded part of the valley so silent that he can hear the breathing of a butterfly perched on a flower, then focuses on the purple foxglove. (I take the separate mention of the butterfly and the flower as an incipient instance of Proust’s latter-day practice of implying ideas by scattering them in bits and pieces that must be strung together to make sense.) In hindsight, the “foxglove in the valley” note suggests that the image of the butterfly perched on a flower hints the connection between Henri and Jean, like the latter-day image of a bee penetrating a pink flower clarifies the meeting of Guercy and Borniche (cf. Compagnon 1988, p. 1194).

Jean-Yves Tadié’s (1971, p. 20) remark that Proust sometimes forgets himself and uses “je” in lieu of “Jean” recalls that “Jean” contains “je”. Indeed, Proust was no stranger to identifying with a flower. In a June 1902 letter to his friend Antoine Bibesco, Proust confides that he envies Bibesco and another friend for being able to see each other, whereas Proust is bedridden. In this context, he borrows from Victor Hugo (1909) the flower-and-butterfly image: “The poor flower said to the celestial butterfly: Don’t flee. . . I stay, you go” (Proust 2022b, p. 211). The gist of this poem is the flower’s anguish regarding the fact that she (flower in French is feminine) remains chained to the earth whereas he (butterfly is masculine) is free to fly wherever he pleases. Proust chained to his bed is the flower; Bibesco, roaming where he will, the butterfly.

The flower’s complaint in Hugo’s poem ends with this plea: “Oh! for our love to enjoy faithful days, | Oh my king, | Take root like me, or give me wings | Like yours” (Hugo 1909, p. 268). Consider in this light what happens in *Jean Santeuil* after the two friends leave the valley. Jean affectionately takes hold of Henri’s arm and says: “my dear Henri, I’m very happy that I have you on the earth [*sur la terre*]” (Proust 1971, p. 472). The flower got her wish, then; the butterfly is on the earth with her. In hindsight, we realize that Hugo’s poem pervaded the entire flower-and-butterfly scene in the secluded valley. And we confirm that

Jean's identification with the foxglove was germane to Proust's own penchant to identify with the flower beseeching the insect.

In Proust's sketches, not only did he link back the sexual conjunction of Guercy and Borniche to the "foxglove in the valley", he also linked it to Hugo's poem directly. A sentence that did not make it to the final text stated that Jupien's body language seemed to tell Charlus "(like the poor flower to the celestial butterfly' and forgetting that they were 'both flowers'): 'Don't flee'" (Proust 1988a, p. 1288). Thus, we find confirmation that Hugo's poem provides the haunting image binding together the meeting between Guercy/Charlus and Borniche/Jupien, Jean's identification with the foxglove in implicit connection with Henri, and Proust's identification with the expectant flower in explicit connection with Bibesco.

Bearing all this in mind, I return to my question: what might be the thought, quite old in the world, which Jean plans to express in a book that is himself? The context of Jean's utterance suggests that the venerable thought concerns homosexuality. That, indeed, is a theme Proust enjoys expressing in the idiom of flowers.

The Proustian Flower Metaphor

One finds in the *Recherche* floral imagery concerning young women, such as we found in wondertales, as a matter of course. The volume that addresses the narrator's discovery of the opposite sex is titled *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*); and, as Katherine Elkins (2022, p. 230) noted, "pink hawthorns—in their unusual color—offer a glimpse of a world that appears almost human, like society ladies in their finery". The narrator pointedly associates his first love for a flower, the hawthorn bloom; and his first love for a *jeune fille*, Gilberte Swann (Proust 1988b, p. 275). He first saw Gilberte, her white face sprinkled with pink marks, immediately after admiring the pink flowers interspersed amid white flowers in the hawthorn hedge of her estate (Proust 1987, pp. 137–39)—a spectacular illustration of the insight that in Proust's analogies "metaphor and metonymy support each other and blend together" (Genette 1972, p. 42).

Until at least 1912, Proust toyed with the idea of having a young girl personifying dark-red roses for a protagonist. An old sketch portrays several girls arranged like flowers on the parquet of the Guermantes salon, who are also said to be like roses on an altar. One of them stands out. She displays velvety, violet, almost black roses on her chest and in her hair, which highlight her purpurin carnation; her cheeks display a dark pink, almost violet hue, and likely smell like roses (Proust 1988a, pp. 960–61, 978–80). This enticing character disappeared in the final version of the *Recherche*, even as Albertine emerged. Some recycling seems to have taken place, for just as the dark-rose girl is the foremost among the rose-girls at the Guermantes salon, so the narrator makes it known that he picked among all the girls in flower at Balbec the most beautiful rose: Albertine, a fleshy efflorescence of dark colors (p. 577), whose blossoming hair—a transposition of her flesh—is like black violets (p. 528).

The second thing to say about Proust's use of floral imagery is that a crossed-out passage in the opening scene to *Sodom and Gomorrah* associates roses with Albertine in another way. In that excised passage, the narrator evokes the pleasures he expects to enjoy in Albertine's arms by analogy with the bee that, having found a flower open and available, soon finds itself sated (Proust 1988a, pp. 1266–67). Here, Proust extends the flower metaphor to the understanding that flowers are "actually the genitals of plants", as Freud (1989, p. 195), using the same metaphor, famously put it. In this view, the flower-and-insect image is a metaphor for the sexual act. This idea was foreshadowed in *The Side by Swann's*, where the first sexual act between Swann and Odette is metaphorically described in terms of him—playing the "role of an audacious bumblebee" (Ton-That 2000, p. 149)—descending on the pollen and the fragrance of the cattleya flowers she is wearing (Proust 1987, pp. 228–29).

And the third thing to say is that Proust mostly uses the metaphor of floral penetration for homosexual conjunctions. Recall that Proust's selective quote of Hugo's poem includes the line "they were 'both flowers'". Also bear in mind that Borniche was a florist and offered a rose as a prelude to offering himself. What is more, Proust (2022b, p. 585) considered calling Charlus "Fleurus".

Would the implication be that Charlus and Jupien are somehow feminine? That, indeed, is the drift of Proust's thought. Immediately before their meeting took place, the narrator experienced an Aha! moment when he saw Charlus unwittingly bearing a feminine expression. And the epiphany was this: Charlus resembles a woman because he is one (Proust 1988a, pp. 6, 16)! Now the narrator can see what had been before his eyes all along: another being, hitherto unseen, is part of Charlus like the horse is part of a centaur. The narrator had never noticed it because he had never understood—it is reason that opens one's eyes. And after he understands, it is as though a magic wand had touched Charlus. He belongs to a race of beings whose ideal is virile because their temperament is feminine; they are double, and only superficially do they resemble other men (pp. 15–16). In draft texts, Proust dubbed the double beings epitomized by Charlus "*la race des tantes*" ("the race of aunties", 921, 930; I borrow "auntie" from the Moncrieff et al. translation). But in the published text he replaces "aunties" with "inverts".

In an unpublished note of justification for this usage, Proust explains that *tante* is the term that would best suit his purpose (Proust 1988a, p. 955). He quotes Balzac's *Splendeur et misère des courtisanes*, where the director of a prison refuses to take a visiting noble Englishman to a section of the prison he designates *le quartier des tantes* (the aunties ward). Asked what *tantes* means, he answers: "It's the third sex, milord!" (Balzac 1855, p. 40). Proust wishes he could imitate Balzac's audacity and use the term; *tantes* being a word with skirts (*jupes*), it would help to ridicule the old ornate socialites he depicts (Proust 1988a, p. 955). This remark brings home that "Jupien" is a name with *jupes*; and it recalls a deleted passage: "'Tante' would have magnificently amplified and ridiculed" Charlus' ample *habit à jupes* (p. 1308).

Alas, Proust concludes, not being Balzac, he will stick with "invert". He would not use "homosexual", in any case, because—since in his view the *tantes* are women in a male body—their sexual relations are precisely *not* homosexual (Proust 1988a, p. 955). Rather, the woman lurking in inverts looks for real men—who, by definition, cannot love them back (p. 17). As a result, Proust writes in a draft, although inverts desire a *non-tante*, they will deem *demi-tante* a *tante* who pleases them (p. 1278). Presumably because Proust is not Balzac, the published text reads: inverts looking for a male often settle for an invert as effeminate as themselves (p. 31). Or else, they can buy the favors of real men; and reciprocally, they can fancy that those to whom they prostitute themselves are real men (p. 17).

This is just the baseline of Proust's analysis of the LGBT+ field, which he calls his first theory on the subject. I stick to the baseline (and will not look on the side of Gomorrah) because it suffices to make my point: when Proust brings into view a third gender that welds male and female together in one body, he addresses ontology (rather than simply sexual preferences). His *hommes-femmes* (men-women, Proust 1988a, pp. 3, 344) bring up androgyny as a category of being.

Androgyny Allomotifs

Proust introduces men-women in the meeting of Charlus and Jupien. The final version of this meeting, in the opening scene of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, happens in counterpoint to a much-anticipated bumblebee's visit to an orchid, the plight of which had been introduced in *The Side of Guermantes*. Oriane de Guermantes owns beautiful mauve orchids (which have an unfortunate name and a foul smell, she allows), and frets that they will die without reproducing. Being "ladies", Oriane explains, they depend on an insect incoming to fertilize them. But the odds of that happening are so vanishingly small that Oriane thinks her plant is still *rosière* (Proust 1988b, p. 805), meaning virgin—not having lost her roses by defloration.

This is, incidentally, a fascinating instance of the flower → maiden metaphor doubling back to flowers—an orchid that kept her roses!

This mauve-orchids episode confers to the scene that opens *Sodom and Gomorrah* its metaphorical dimension. Jupien, upon seeing Charlus, at first stays “rooted like a plant”, then strikes poses with the *coquetterie* that the orchid might have shown to the incoming bumblebee (Proust 1988a, p. 6). Metaphorically, Jupien is the orchid about to be penetrated by the insect—by Charlus, that big bumblebee—and their conjunction amounts to the miraculous arrival of the long-awaited insect to fertilize the lady orchid (Proust 1988a, pp. 8, 29). Jupien, the one with figured *jupes* resonating with a mauve orchid, replaces the florist Borniche connoting pink flowers.

The use of orchids to depict inverts is traceable to early sketches. (Bear in mind that Odette’s mauve cattleyas are also orchids; I must leave this thread aside, but see Eells 2000, pp. 336–37.) A draft from 1909 depicts a solitary figure who scans the crowd on a train-station platform looking for the rare devotee of the singular pleasure they offer. Their sexual organ being oddly placed (as also happens in the case of certain flowers, and even certain animals), they have trouble finding their match. Someone belonging to their species would be needed—someone who would be female in nature to submit to their desire, but male in appearance to inspire it (Proust 1988a, p. 928). Another notebook reiterates the comparison of the solitary figure to flowers whose organ of love is so misplaced that they risk wilting before being fertilized (p. 1286), and—one step ahead—identifies this metaphorical “flower of train stations” with the orchid (cit. in Teyssandier 2015, par. 5). More parsimoniously, the final text compares the gaze the train-station figure directs at the crowd with the nectar some flowers offer to attract insects (Proust 1988a, p. 28). Because this nectar-and-insect theme resonates with the plight of Oriane’s mauve orchid, the orchid goes unmentioned in the final text—yet another instance of Proust scattering themes in different scenes that illuminate one another.

In order to understand why Proust associates men-women with the orchid, two complementary paths are open. One is by way of realizing that Oriane’s foul-smelling orchid is the *Himantoglossum hircinum* (Proust 1988b, p. 1789). This plant presents an elongated, body-like shape seemingly endowed with testicles (such is the meaning of *órkhis* in Ancient Greek) and decked with myriad flowers (Figure 1)—a suggestive image for men-women!

The second path is by way of allomotifs. In the aforementioned early sketch, Proust envisions the day when the “flower of train stations” (i.e., the metaphorical orchid) will be introduced to the “Andromeda of beaches” (cit. in Teyssandier 2015, par. 5), another figuration of the solitary invert. This is a stable association: *Sodom and Gomorrah I* likens the solitary invert of train stations to a strange Andromeda on the beach, whom no Argonaut will come to liberate (Proust 1988a, pp. 27–28).

Before pursuing the Andromeda image, consider that Proust also draws a comparison of the solitary invert with a sterile jellyfish stranded on the beach. And even in this unpromising salty soil the flower resurfaces, for the narrator exclaims “Jellyfish! Orchid!” and goes on to explain that the jellyfish is like “a mauve orchid of the sea” (Proust 1988a, p. 28). That the sterile jellyfish is tantamount to the orchid suggests that sterility is somehow pertinent regarding the orchid. And since this “mauve orchid” again recalls the eponymous plant at Oriane’s salon, it is wise to take some instruction there. One of Oriane’s guests, well versed in plants, compares the plight of her orchid to the vanilla plant, which—as he explains—has male and female flowers so strictly separated that no fertilization is possible without external help (Proust 1988b, p. 806). Back to the sterile jellyfish and the mauve orchid of the sea, the narrator himself associates both with the vanilla plant, which—he says—would remain sterile if unaided (Proust 1988a, p. 28). Proust’s explicit point is that such bisexual beings invoke the law of the sterility of self-fertilization. And he clarifies why male inverts are in this category: having an inner female not useful for reproduction, they are rather like snails, which—despite being hermaphroditic—cannot fertilize themselves but need other snails. Besides, inverts—being too close to women—cannot have productive sexual relations; hence they belong with androgynous plants and partake of their sterility (pp. 30–31).



Figure 1. *Himantoglossum hircinum* (Correvon 1899, Plate 23). Taken from Wikimedia Commons, and reproduced under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Album_des_orchid%C3%A9es_de_l'Europe_centrale_et_septentrionale_BHL15446389.jpg (accessed on 10 September 2024).

The narrator adds that people like Charlus might hark back to a primordial time when neither dioecious flowers nor unisexual animals existed; to the initial condition of hermaphroditism, that is, of which the rudiments of male organs in the female anatomy and of female organs in the male body are seemingly the traces (Proust 1988a, p. 31). Proust is here on a parallel track to Freud, who noted that the traces of the sexual apparatus of the opposite sex in each individual might be the remains of an original condition of hermaphroditism (Freud 1991b, pp. 46, 52).

Finally, we can consider the image of the strange Andromeda whom no Argonaut will rescue. The story of Andromeda and Perseus (incidentally, not an Argonaut) is about a king's daughter offered as a sacrifice to a sea monster. Perseus finds the princess bound to a rock by the sea, falls in love with her, and slays the monster to win her hand (Hansen 2002, p. 122). To understand Proust's statement that the strange Andromeda will not be rescued, two steps are necessary. First, realize that the traditional image of Andromeda bound to a rock, yearning to be set free, resonates with the Proustian image of the invert as a woman shut in a man's body, ever attempting to escape her prison (see Proust 1988a, p. 22). Second, the notion that being bound to a rock (as to a male body) takes away the

hope of being rescued by a hero is just another way of saying that inverts yearn for real men who cannot love them back (p. 17). Androgyny is still the gist of the matter.

Andromeda, Flower, Proust

The aforementioned letter to Antoine Bibesco confirms that Andromeda being bound to her rock is what interests Proust. The letter provides other insights as well, so I address it briefly. It is addressed to Ocsebib (=Bibesco) and advises him not to invite to his forthcoming countryside tea reception two ill-assorted men together—and, as far as ill-fitted couples go, to try to keep to heterosexual ones. Then Proust proceeds to tell his friend not to invite Nomara (=Aramon) out of unwarranted kindness for him, since Proust will not be able to attend. The letter makes it clear that both Bibesco and Proust know who is gay and who is not, and they converse about it.

Moreover, Proust is frank about who he is romantically interested in—in this case, Bertrand d’Aramon (a waning interest, it would seem) and, more fervently, Bertrand de Fénelon (introduced in the letter as Nonelef), for whom Proust was avowedly besotted (Proust 2022b, pp. 210–11, 212, 214; cf. Robert 1988, pp. 1640–43). Many years later, in *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Proust suddenly possesses Marcel to posthumously heap praise on his “dearest friend” Bertrand de Fénelon (who died in 1914) as “the most intelligent being, good and brave, unforgettable for all those who knew him” (Proust 1988a, p. 168). Also relevant is the fact that in the letter, only the names of Aramon, Bibesco, and Fénelon are given inverted. I submit that the inverted names highlight, with self-deprecating humor, the “inverts” that Bibesco knows Proust feels drawn to. Or rather, since on occasion Proust signs his own name inverted (Proust 2022b, p. 212), the procedure seems to humorously cast their close circle of friends as a secret inverts guild. The bottom line is that this letter is unguardedly confessional—totally imbecile (*imbécillissime*) is Proust’s way of putting it.

This context is relevant to consider the fact that in the letter Proust depicts himself as both a male Andromeda and an expectant flower:

Most of all, please forgive all this advice, which I don’t have the right to impose on you. Forgive me and let me know whether you agree that it reflects the subjective and jealous disposition in me of a masculine Andromeda, always bound to her rock (*attachée*, feminine) and suffering from seeing Antoine Bibesco drift away and multiply himself in social events whilst he is unable (*sans qu’il puisse*, masculine) to follow. Hence, my anti-worldliness advice would perhaps boil down to an unconscious, didactic and pejorative form of the sublime “The poor flower said to the celestial butterfly: | Don’t flee. . . I stay, you go.” (Proust 2022b, p. 211)

In this letter to a trusted confidant, Proust identifies with the strange-Andromeda image, the trope he uses for people like Charlus; and then with Hugo’s expectant flower, the image he associated with Jupien’s body language and (tacitly) with Jean’s identification with the foxglove.

To recap these threads: Proust associates the female in men-women with Charlus being metaphorically a strange Andromeda, also a sterile jellyfish, that is to say a mauve orchid; with Jupien being metaphorically a mauve orchid; and with himself, self-depicted as both a chained Andromeda and an expectant flower. The bottom line is that in the 1902 letter we get a glimpse of Proust identifying with his own prototype of the solitary homosexual. He shares a sense of floral identity with two future characters he will assimilate to the *Himantoglossum hircinum*, and with a past character self-identified with the foxglove. In this continuous arc of thought, it now becomes clear that the purple foxglove is a predecessor for the mauve orchid (see Figures 1 and 2). By the same token, Jean starts a line of characters who are “flowers”—like Proust himself—in the sense of Hugo’s flower beseeching the butterfly. In Jean there was *je*, we confirm in hindsight.

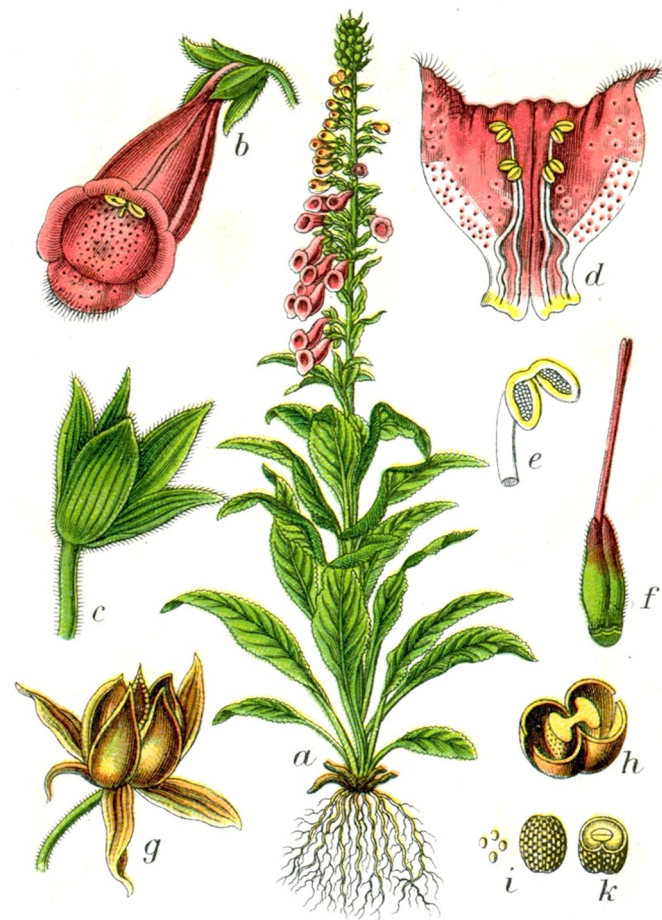


Figure 2. *Digitalis purpurea*. Painter: Jacob Sturm. Taken from Wikimedia Commons. This work is in the public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Digitalis_purpurea_Sturm10033.jpg (accessed on 10 September 2024).

Beyond Male and Female

I asked: what was the thought, quite old in the world, which Jean plans to express in a book that is himself? The foregoing discussion suggests the book-to-be would hinge on a prominent thread of mauve-pink flowers. Otherwise put, the very old thought to express in that book is the venerable theme Jean himself represents: the “third sex” spelled out by Balzac’s prison director; that is, Proust’s *hommes-femmes* related to the primal androgyne; in today’s parlance, the theme of non-binaries.

Jean’s train of thought before the purple foxglove was indeed premonitory of the future book, or so Proust’s obsession with bringing up the *hommes-femmes* theme in the project suggests. In 1909, seeking to place *Contre Sainte-Beuve* with Mercure de France, he saw fit to tell the publisher that the book, despite its innocuous title, is extremely obscene in some parts and features a homosexual as a main character (Proust 2022b, p. 490). In 1912, having recycled the unpublished *Contre Sainte-Beuve* in a new project in two parts—*Le Temps perdu*, *Le Temps retrouvé*—Proust sought to place it with Fasquelle. Again, he warned the publisher that the second part is scandalous on account of a virile character that turns out to be a “pederast” (pp. 577–79). Later in the same year, trying to place the project with Nouvelle Revue française (NRF), the motto recurs: the second volume is rather shocking because of Fleurus, a virile pederast (p. 585). It might be countered that Proust’s warnings simply meant to avoid future misunderstandings. But this line of thought falls short of explaining why in 1920 Proust could not help himself telling a literary critic, apropos of the imminent publication of *The Side of Guermantes I*, “[i]t is still a ‘decent’ book. After this one, things get spoiled by no fault of mine. My characters go astray; I’m obliged to follow them wherever their flaw or aggravated vice leads them” (cit. in Compagnon 1988, pp. 1254–55).

I conclude that Jean might have been astounded to see how far his sketched arc of thought extended—how the complete pink-mauve floral thread of the *Recherche* unfolded from the purple flower in the reclusive valley. Quite likely, *hommes-femmes* is the hoary thought Proust wanted to preserve in an offering to the future, via a book that would be himself.

And there is something else. In a latter-day reflection that did not make it to press, Proust proposed another angle on the connection between the flowers and his literary project. The laws that guide the reproductive behavior of flowers recall the laws that drive unconscious thinking, he proposed. The only book worth being written, he added, would be one that unveils the unconscious laws that drive our imagination and our self-regard (*amour propre*); the book to aim for would bring what is unconscious to consciousness (Proust 1988a, pp. 5, 1269–71; cf. Freud 1989, p. 347; 1991a, p. 288). Notice the close analogy between the floral laws helpful to think through the androgyne and the laws underlying Proust's literary project. Jean's intuition about a book that would be himself, then, foreshadows a work that brings to consciousness the non-binary sphere of the unconscious: the androgyne is of the essence of Proust's œuvre (cf. Eells 2000, p. 345).

Coda

In this quest through symbolic universes, I have used the procedure of comparing allomotifs, drawn from folklore, on a literary work that revels in variants. The experiment revealed that a floral metaphor, widespread in fairy tales, was redesigned to fit Proust's fictional universe. What is more, we found across the two domains what one might call conjunctions of opposites. In wondertales, evil characters and beneficent deeds go together; hence, opposite characters are interchangeable to a degree (Vaz da Silva 2023, pp. 28, 51–53, 113–18, 135–36). For example, Maleficent in Disney's reinterpretation becomes a "fairy godmother" (Stromberg 2014). Likewise, Proust's so-called inverts bring the two sexes together; and they—like snails—are interchangeable. For example, Charlus is both the bumblebee and the orchid; the butterfly and the flower are "both flowers". Kazuyoshi Yoshikawa (2021, p. 67) understands such instances as inconsistencies, a flaw in Proust's theory of *hommes-femmes*. I rather think it is a feature, for a pattern is clear. Past Proust's first theory of inversion, we find for example Morel, who is skilled in giving pleasure to both men and women (Proust 1988a, pp. 24, 302), performing as a man with women who like men (pp. 396–97), yet being treated as a woman by women who like women (pp. 720, 875).

Here, as in other domains—such as the connection between Marcel-narrator and Proust-author, between the magnum opus the former envisions and the *Recherche* the latter wrote—the Proustian imagination secretes ambiguity and flirts with paradox. When suddenly Proust possesses Marcel to pay homage to Bertrand de Fénelon, say, we watch the author interjecting himself into the very story he is writing; or, put another way, the narrator leaps out of the story he is a character in. Such paradoxical collapses of hierarchical levels are regular events in the *Recherche* (see instances in Miguet-Ollagnier 2001, pp. 84–85). Moreover, many personages in the novel encompass a given appearance and its opposite traits of character (Yoshikawa 2021, p. 48). In a fascinating essay, Emily Eells (2000, pp. 345–49) argues that a scheme of "binary unity" underlies Proust's œuvre in a sort of literary androgyny, one stylistic marker of which is Proust's uses of *on*, "the pronoun of ambiguity par excellence".

This brings up a final thought. As we shifted from the narrative axis to the underlying symbolic codes, we glimpsed complex entities enmeshed in patterns of symbolic reversal and ambiguity. Two decades ago, I spotted such patterns in wondertales (Vaz da Silva 2000), and presently I meet them in Proust's œuvre. Is the Proustian imagination fairytale-like, then? I will say that the trebling of episodes and characters is one characteristic trait of fairy tales (Vaz da Silva 2023, pp. 23–26), and—as Marie Miguet-Ollagnier (1982, pp. 363–75; 2001, pp. 81–82) pointed out—Proust consistently trebles important episodes and images. But the main thing, I suppose, is that Proust's "hybrid and polymorphic" discourse involving animals and plants (Ton-That 2000, p. 152) pertains to the mindset Claude Lévi-Strauss

called *pensée sauvage* (wild thought), which performs logical operations at the level of percepts. As Proust (1989, p. 457) himself explains, he focuses on interpretable material impressions conveyed by the senses.

Lévi-Strauss presented his insight of a *logique du concret* (a logic of concrete representations), operating with significant images (Lévi-Strauss 1962, pp. 27–28, 346), thus: “Wild thought, not the thought of savages, . . . blooming in every human mind . . . so long as it is not cultivated and domesticated . . . this mode of thought resembles what we find very close to us, in poetry and art, as well as in folklore, both archaic and recent” (blurb on the back-cover flap). Proust’s uses of flowers to think through modes of sexuality and ontology are cases in point. Although Lévi-Strauss was famously keen on the notion that this metaphoric-mythical mode of thought is binary, he did grant that mythic figures are “endowed with an ambiguous and equivocal character” (Lévi-Strauss 1955, p. 441). He acknowledged that defining a “universe of the tale” involves analyzing “pairs of oppositions interlocked within each character” (Lévi-Strauss 1984, p. 182), which precisely matches our findings in both wondertales and the *Recherche*.

You probably noticed that Lévi-Strauss’ definition of *pensée sauvage*—thought “blooming” in minds if it is not “cultivated”, “domesticated”—is itself metaphorical. *Pensée sauvage* is also the wild pansy (*Viola tricolor*) displayed on the book cover (Figure 3). Yet another flower metaphor on our path, then! And there is more. The culminating chapter of *La Pensée sauvage* is titled “Le Temps retrouvé” (Time Regained), which sets it in a metaphorical relation with the *Recherche*, itself a haven of flower metaphors. Moreover, while arguing that in metaphorical mappings the literal and figurative levels are interchangeable, Lévi-Strauss writes: “As in the sex life of snails, the function of each class, literal or figurative, starts out as undetermined; then, according to the role that it will be called upon to play in a global structure of signification, it induces the opposite function in the other class” (Lévi-Strauss 1988, pp. 193–94). If you marvel that Lévi-Strauss references Proust while enriching our sample of flower metaphors, and like Proust uses the sex life of snails to make a point transcending static binaries, your close readings serve you well. As Lévi-Strauss applies metaphorical thinking to metaphorical thinking, he meets Proust (and wondertales) on a shared ground of symbolic thought. A host of interesting implications follow, which unfortunately I cannot unpack here (but see Vaz da Silva 2012).

I will stick to the main point. Beyond the gulf between folklore and literature, we made ourselves at home in a mental universe where flowers are good to think with. In Proust’s poesis as well as in folklore, advancement is possible in the study of symbolic thought, where hard binary categories—such as good and evil, masculine and feminine—give way to a host of complex, dynamic, mutually permeable varieties of being. The foregoing discussion showed that Proust thinks metaphorically, through significant images, in a deluge of variants. Whether his composite literary corpus qualifies as folklore depends—rather like in the sex life of snails—on the predispositions readers bring to bear on the corpus. One lesson from this study is that Proust’s imagination—relentlessly secreting variants, tirelessly weaving intertextual harmonies—performs like a full-fledged tradition, and bears the creative hallmarks of a fairy tale for the ages.

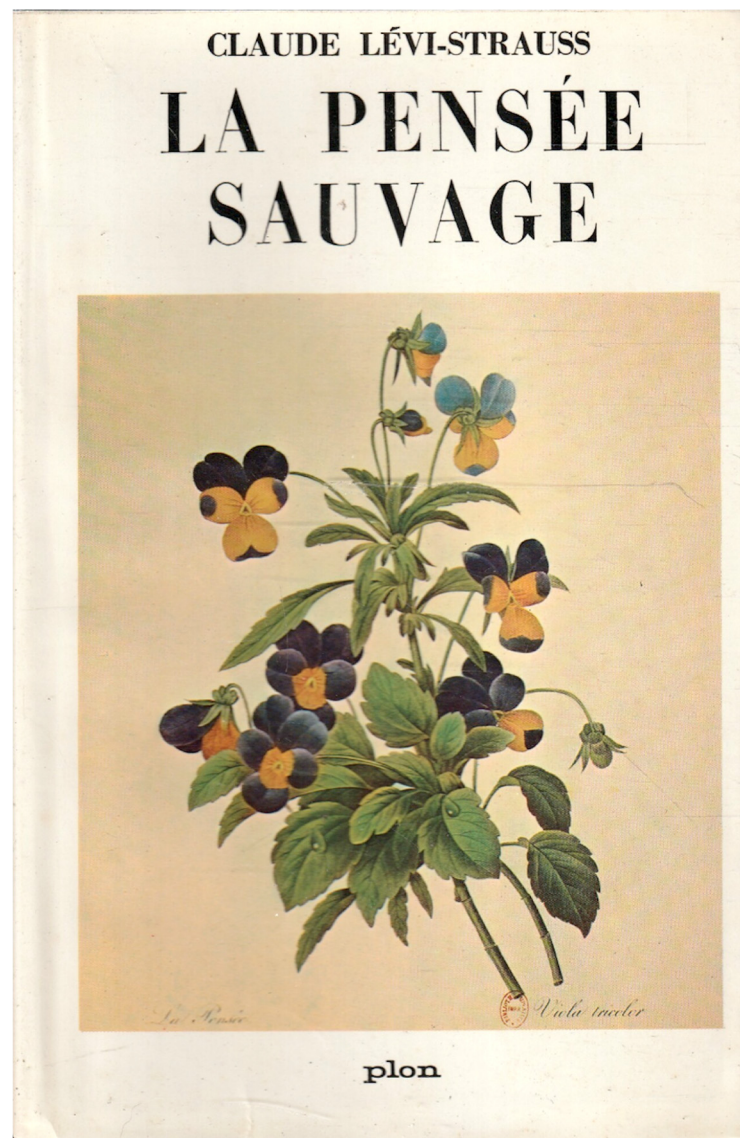


Figure 3. *Viola tricolor* (Lévi-Strauss 1962).

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