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‘Before Man’s fall, the Rose was born / (S. Ambrose says) without the Thorn’. Rose and Thorns as a Conceptual Metaphor?

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In Basil of Caesarea’s Greek Hexameron, nine homilies commenting on the opening lines of the Book of Genesis, and in Ambrose of Milan’s Latin translation of that work (preached by the bishop around 386–387 AD), the roses in Paradise have no thorns. However, thorns are allegedly added after the original sin (see Genesis 3:18). Ambrose elaborates on Basil’s text, stating that the addition of thorns is to remind human beings that earthly joys always come with the ‘sting’ of sorrow. This image can be defined as a symbol, an allegory, or a (literary) metaphor. The writer argues that applying Conceptual Metaphor Theory to this image can provide a deeper understanding of it. As a matter of fact, viewing the image within the framework of the broad, widespread and conventional conceptual metaphor ‘humans are plants’ highlights its effectiveness. This shows that the two preachers exploit it to convey a Christian perspective on human life and the joys of life, whether sinful or innocent, to their audience.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, rose, thorn, Ambrose of Milan, Basil of Caesarea.

Before Mans fall, the Rose was born
(S. Ambrose sayes) without the Thorn;
But, for Mans fault, then was the Thorn,
Without the fragrant Rose-bud, born;
But ne're the Rose without the Thorn.
(R. Herrick, *The Rose*)

Flow'rs of all hue, and without thorn the rose.
(J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4, 256).

In Robert Herrick's *The rose*, as well as in John Milton's *Paradise lost*, the rose has no thorns prior to Adam and Eve's sin. This detail ultimately comes from Ambrose of Milan's *Hexameron*.¹ According to Ambrose, thorns were added to the rose after Adam's condemnation in *Genesis* 3:18, which states that the earth *spinas et tribulos germinabit tibi*. Ambrose likens human life to the thorn-bearing rose.

Elsewhere, I show the usefulness of interpreting Ambrose of Milan's *Hexameron* — a series of nine homilies on creation, inspired by Basil of Caesarea and delivered around 387 — through the lens of “Conceptual Metaphor Theory” (CMT). In that study, I examine instances of the conceptual metaphor ‘human beings are plants’ > ‘human life is the life of plants’ as they appear in Homily 5 of the *Hexameron*, which deals with the creation of plants (3. 5. 6. 25 –17, 72).² Here, I focus on the chapter about roses (*Hex.* 3. 5. 11. 48) to demonstrate how conceptualizing ‘the joys of human life’ in terms of ‘the beauty of the rose’ can lead contemporary listeners of Ambrose as well as modern readers to a deeper understanding of an aspect of human life — i. e., the widespread conception of joy as always accompanied by the ‘sting’ of sorrow. As Lucretius wrote, *medio de fonte leporum surgit amari aliquid quod in ipsis floribus angat*, ‘from the very fountain of enchantment rises a drop of bitterness to torment even in the flowers’ (4. 1133–1134, transl. Rouse 1924).

The CMT focuses on the inherent cognitive value that characterizes the category of conceptual metaphors,³ which cannot be reduced to metaphor as mere ornaments of discourse.⁴ A conceptual metaphor is essentially expressed through the formula ‘A is B’. For example, ‘human life is the life of plants’. The *Target* (A) is an abstract and complex concept that is difficult to define. Therefore, it is conceptualized in terms of the *Source* (B), a concrete ‘thing’ that is part of the shared experience of the speaker and recipient. The *Source* enables the conceptual construction of the *Target* through a series of correspondences (*mappings*).⁵ These conceptual metaphors are essentially the “metaphors we live by”;⁶ and perform an effective cognitive function *just because* they are deeply rooted in fundamental human experience and highly conventional. On the one hand, ‘human life’ is often a *Target* due to its complexity and paradoxical nature. On the other hand, ‘plants’ are a common *Source*; their parts, the actions performed to improve them (e. g., cultivation), the stages

¹ Milton relies on Robert Herrick, who in turn relies on Ambrose: cf. Kerrigan et al. 2007, ad loc. Whiting 1959 hints at Milton as possibly reading (also) Ambrose.

² Moretti, forthcoming.

³ On CMT, see the still seminal Lakoff, Johnson 2003 and Lakoff, Turner 1989. See also Kövecses 2010 and Horn 2025.

⁴ On the use of metaphor as a rhetorical device, see Lausberg 1998, §§ 588–564. However, ancient theorists were aware of the cognitive value of metaphor: see at least Novokhatko 2014; 2016; 2019; 2021b.

⁵ Kövecses 2010, 3–15; see also Kövecses 2017.

⁶ Cf. the title of the well-known study by Lakoff, Johnson 2003; see also Kövecses 2010, 38–39.

of their development, and their lifespan are often used to construct complex *Targets*.⁷ The widespread nature of this conceptual metaphor is demonstrated, e. g., by Augustine (*doctr.* 3. 27. 40), who remarks on the abundance of *tropi* (including metaphors *stricto sensu*) in everyday language and adds: *Quis enim non dicit 'sic floreas'?* The phrase *Sic floreas!* can be understood as an example of the conceptual metaphor 'humans are plants', where (the plants') *florere* is an easily understood metaphor of prosperity.⁸ Such cognitive function is easily accomplished because this metaphor belongs to "ordinary natural language semantics".⁹ Lastly, it is important to remember that conceptual metaphors can appear in texts in various forms, such as linguistic metaphors, similes, parables, allegories and proverbs.¹⁰

Like Basil's, Ambrose's homilies are acts of "comunicazione polivalente",¹¹ as they are intended to be understood in various ways by diverse audiences to achieve his both 'epistemic' and 'paranetic' goals:¹² as a matter of fact, taking advantage of the conceptual metaphor 'humans are plants', Ambrose shapes a Christian idea of human life for his listeners and suggests appropriate behaviors. As I demonstrate elsewhere in detail, Ambrose, following Basil, develops at least three sets of mappings between the *Source* 'life of plants' and the *Target* 'human life': (1) to conceptualize the condition of life (*Hex.* 3. 5. 7. 29–30): the green herb is fragile and short-lived → human life and earthly glory are fragile and short-lived (cf. also *Is* 40:6: *Omnis caro faenum et omnis gloria hominis ut flos faeni*; (2) to conceptualize the propagation of life (*Hex.* 3. 5. 7. 31; 3, 5, 10, 43–44): plants propagate *secundum genus* (*Gen* 1:12) → humans must preserve their own *genus*, as they are children of God; (3) to conceptualize activities improving humans (*Hex.* 3. 5. 13. 55–56): agriculture improves fruits → care and effort improve human virtues.

Of all plants, the rose is perhaps the one that is most often loaded with 'other' meanings.¹³ Ambrose takes his cue from Basil (*Hex.* 5. 6. 3), who says that thorns emerged after the original sin, meaning that no earthly joy is free from the 'sting' of sorrow.¹⁴ Ambrose elaborates on this, and combines the thorn of original sin with the mention of the flower's fragility (*Hex.* 3. 5. 11. 48):¹⁵

Surrexerat ante floribus inmixta terrenis sine spinis rosa et pulcerrimus flos sine ulla fraude vernabat, postea spina saepsit gratiam floris tamquam humanae speculum praeferens vitae, quae suavitatem perfunctionis suae finitimis curarum stimulis saepe conpungat. Vallata est

⁷ See Lakoff, Turner 1989, 6, 12–14, 84; Kövecses 2010, 19, 152–162. The Source 'plants' occurs frequently in studies devoted to single conceptual metaphors. For example, see Buccheri 2016 on kinship.

⁸ See *ThlL* s. v. *floreo* (Kapp, 1919), VI/1 917.48–920.60. This metaphor is also common in literary texts, from which grammarians draw their examples: e. g., *ambo florentes aetatibus* (= Verg. *Ecl.* 7, 4) in Diom. *Gramm.* 2, GLK I 457; *florida iuventus* (= Aug. *Mend.* 10, 24) in Isid. *Etym.* 1, 37, 4.

⁹ Novokhatko 2021b, 154. On the continuity or discontinuity between literary and non-literary language regarding the use of metaphors, see Semino, Steen 2008.

¹⁰ Cf. Steen 2014, 319.

¹¹ The expression is coined by Malaspina 1988, 58–95.

¹² "Epistemic" and "paranetic goals" are mentioned by Stenger 2016, dealing with John Chrysostome's preachings; see also Novokhatko 2021, 691–694.

¹³ See Joret 1892; Heinz Mohr-Sommer 1989; Mello 2004; Cattabiani 2001 (chapter 'La rosa è la rosa è la rosa'); Ferber 2017, 181–185. On proverbs, cfr. Otto 1890, 302, s.v. 'rosa', 302; Tosi 2017, nr. 2200.

¹⁴ 'But then the rose was without thorns; since then, the thorn has been added to its beauty, to make us feel that sorrow is very near to pleasure, and to remind us of our sin, which condemned the earth to produce thorns and caltrops' (Jackson 1895).

¹⁵ Basil's and Ambrose's 'rose without thorns' is hinted at by Joret 1892, 232–233; Heinz-Mohr, Sommer 1989, 32; Nazzaro 2016, 71.

enim elegancia vitae nostrae et quibusdam sollicitudinibus opsaepta, ut tristitia adiuncta sit gratiae. Unde cum unusquisque aut suavitate rationis aut prosperioris cursus successibus gratulatur, meminisse culpae eum convenit, per quam nobis in paradisi amoenitate florentibus spinae mentis animique sentes iure condemnationis ascripti sunt. Inrutilis igitur licet, o homo, aut splendore nobilitatis aut fastigio potestatis aut fulgore virtutis, semper tibi spina proxima est, semper est sentis, semper inferiora tua respice: super spinam germinas, nec proluxa gratia manet.¹⁶ Brevi unusquisque decurso aetatis flore marcescit.¹⁷

Mingling formerly with the flowers of the earth and without thorns, the rose, most beautiful of all flowers, displayed its beauty without guile; afterwards, the thorn fenced around this charming flower, presenting, as it were, an image of human life in which what is pleasing in our activities is often accompanied with the stings of anxieties which everywhere surround us. In fact, the elegance of our life is entrenched and hedged about by certain cares, so that sadness is close neighbor to beauty. Hence, when each one of us finds joys either in the pleasing exercise of our reason or in the attainment of more than usual success in life, it is fitting that we should call to mind this sin of ours, by means of which there was imposed upon us by rightful condemnation the mind's thorns and the spirit's brambles, when we were happily sojourning amid the delights of paradise. Although you may shine, man, with the splendor of nobility or by reason of your superior power or by the brilliance of your virtue, the thorn is ever close to you, the bramble is ever near you. Ever be mindful of what is beneath you. You blossom into life above a thorn and this beauty does not last for long. In a brief passage of time each and every one of us withers in the flower of his age (transl. Savage 1961).

The *mappings* that the *Source* 'the beauty of rose' projects onto the *Target* 'the joys of human life' might be as follows:

- the beauty of the rose is always accompanied by thorns. After 'the rose without thorns', we have 'the rose with thorns' → the joys of human life are always accompanied by the 'sting' of sorrow: after 'the joys without sorrow', we have 'the joys with sorrow';
- the beauty of the rose is ephemeral → the joys of life are ephemeral.

Here, Basil and Ambrose, as literary writers, freely elaborate on conventional materials by creating unconventional variations.¹⁸ For example, they conceptualize the *Target* 'joys without sorrow' (which do not exist!) in terms of the *Source* 'roses without thorns' (which also do not exist!). The latter is not a concrete experience, but rather a reversal of the shared experience of 'roses with thorns'. The two common experiences of picking a rose and getting painfully pricked by its thorns or watching the flower wither quickly¹⁹ construct the *Target* of human life, whose joys are inevitably accompanied by sorrow and whose glory is fragile.

Despite the use of military terminology (*vallata*, *saepsit*, *opsaepta*), the thorns in Ambrose are not intended to protect the beauty of the flower²⁰; rather, they are intended to make its enjoyment painful. If the rose in Paradise was *sine ulla fraude*, and hence joys did

¹⁶ I have slightly changed the punctuation, putting a colon after *respice*: I argue that *inferiora tua* is clarified by *super spinam germinas*, meaning the frail basis on which human life is born.

¹⁷ I quote Ambrose according to Schenkl 1897.

¹⁸ Cf. Lakoff, Turner 1989, 67–72; Kövecses 2010, 49–59; Semino, Steen 2008.

¹⁹ On this topic, see Heinz-Mohr, Sommer 1989, 27–33.

²⁰ A 'military vocabulary' is found also in Symphosius' riddle about the rose by (45: *Purpura sum terrae, pulchro perfusa rubore, / saepaque, ne violer, telis defendor acutis. / O felix, longo si possim vivere fato!*, 'I am the purple of the earth, steeped in a beautiful blush, and, being hedged around so that I am not

not involve any risk of being ‘stung’ (i. e., deceived), then, in the post-lapsarian condition, the enjoyment of life’s *gratia* and *elegantia* is always accompanied by the pain of being stung by thorns: the thorns of *curae*, *sollicitudines* and *tristitia*, which remind human beings of their frailty and that they are born ‘entirely in sin’.

In the final part of the passage, the human being is transformed into a gorgeous, yet ephemeral, rose. First, it is the rose of Paradise (*nobis... florentibus*²¹), to which *spinae mentis animique sentes* are added after sin. Then, it is the post-lapsarian rose, which, even when it shines in splendor (*inrutilis*, perhaps an Ambrosian hapax,²² denoting the radiant red of roses²³), will never forget the *spina* and *sentes* from which it is sprang (*germinas*), being bound to bloom and wither quickly (*brevi aetatis decurso flore marcescit*²⁴).

In sum, adopting a CMT approach allows us to understand the cognitive processes that prompt the creation — and variation — of this image, and to better appreciate its pedagogical effectiveness with a diverse audience. ‘The beauty of the rose’, along with its easily identifiable features, is an ideal *Source* for construing the *Target* of ‘the joys of human life’, with all its contradictions and paradoxes. This conceptual metaphor stems from the broader metaphorical matrix ‘humans are plants’ > ‘human life is the life of plants’, and reveals why joys of human life are inevitably accompanied by the otherwise inexplicable ‘sting’ of disquiet and sorrow.

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attacked, I am defended by sharp weapons. Happy, indeed, if I were able to live a long life’ (transl. Leary 2014). Cf. Mello 2004, 154 and Leary 2014, 145.

²¹ On *floreo*, see above.

²² Cf. *Thll* s.v. *irrutilo* (Ruhsteller 1962), VII/2 454.53 — 454.70.

²³ Elsewhere, the term *rutilans* is found: cf. *Hex.* 3. 5. 8. 36, on roses (*rutilantes rosas*), and *Hex.* 3. 5. 15. 62, describing water flowing among roses (*inter rosas rutilantior*).

²⁴ The metaphor of *flos aetatis* is very common: see *Thll* s.v. *flos* (Kapp 1919), VI/1 934.60 — 935.47. The verb *marcescere* is associated with roses in the Bible (Sap 2:8: *coronemus nos rosis, antequam marcescant*, ‘Let us crown ourselves with roses, before they be withered’), a passage that is repeatedly quoted by Ambrose (*Cain* 1, 4, 14; *Tob.* 5, 17; *exp. ps.* 118 8, 14); cf. also *Thll* s.v. *marcesco* (Bachmann 1938), VIII 374.1 — 375.31.

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«До грехопадения человека родилась Роза / (говорит С. Амвросий) без Шипа».
Роза и шипы как концептуальная метафора?

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В греческом «Гексамероне» Василия Кесарийского, девяти проповедях, комментирующих первые строки Книги Бытия, и в латинском переводе этого произведения Амвросия Медиоланского (проповеди епископа около 386–387 гг. н. э.), розы в Раю не имеют шипов. Однако шипы, как утверждается, добавляются после первородного греха (см. Бытие 3:18). Амвросий подробно разбирает текст Василия, утверждая, что добавление шипов призвано напомнить людям, что земные радости всегда сопровождаются «жалом» печали. Этот образ можно определить как символ, аллегорию или (литературную) метафору. Автор утверждает, что применение теории концептуальной метафоры к этому образу поможет глубже понять его. Фактически рассмотрение образа в рамках широко распространенной и общепринятой концептуальной метафоры «люди — это растения» подчеркивает его эффективность. Это показывает, что два проповедника используют его, чтобы донести до своей аудитории христианскую точку зрения на человеческую жизнь и радости жизни, греховные или невинные.

Ключевые слова: теория концептуальной метафоры, роза, шипы, Амвросий Медиоланский, Василий Кесарийский.

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