

Directions in Blake's Ah! Sun-flower and Ginsberg's Sunflower Sutra

Abstract

A comparative analysis of Ah! Sun-flower and Sunflower Sutra brings to light characteristic patterns of east-west movement, circularity and containment-change that readers probably enjoy, even if they are not quite aware of them. In the Blake poem the sun-follower can be interpreted as a 'rooted traveller', vainly wishing to go west, being trapped in the unending cycle of ripening, going under ground, coming up again, never reaching the desired timelessness of fulfilment. In the Ginsberg poem the main addressee is the reader, who is unequivocally informed that going west in search of the dream was misguided. In a crumbling junkyard of industrial imitation body parts, by the final resting place of Whitman's locomotive, a battered sunflower appears and takes us back to the east, to the Blake poem, to the discovery that we are sunflowers inside. The directions within the texts can be supplemented with the directions leading away from them, creating a network of interpretive blends. An unravelling of the recurrent movement of activated domains inside (patterns) and their intricate mesh outside the texts (pointers) is of interest in itself, as well as providing grounds for interpretations.

1. Introduction

At the heart of this analysis there is the term *text world*, as it is defined by Paul Werth: "A text world is a deictic space, defined initially by the discourse itself, and specifically by the deictic and referential elements in it... The referential elements, in their turn, activate relevant areas of memory, including ... chunks of experience and situations, codified and stored in memory as single items." Werth (1999:20). Patterns of deixis within the text and references to extra textual frames in the comparison of the two sunflower poems show similarities at the level of describable form. As key deictic elements I chose time and space and found an underlying visual image of movements that probably guides consensual interpretations. By consensual I mean that that the majority of readers can accept it. As a key referential element I chose Ginsberg's declared intention of dialoguing with the Blake poem. Before my talk, all stressed, I met Mary Ellen Ryder outside on the lawn in the sunshine and asked her to give me

a word that could express the referential 'thing'. She said: Pointer, why not. Patterns and pointers sound okay. I would like to thank Mary Ellen Ryder for the word and express gratitude that I could meet her.

2. Patterns of time and place in Ah! Sun-flower

The contention is that both Blake's and Ginsberg's poems contain some circularity of movement, a time and place change in an east-west, west-east direction and a desire to break out of some death-like containment.

AH! SUN-FLOWER

Ah Sun-flower! weary of time Where the Youth pined away with desire,
Who countest the steps of the Sun: And the pale virgin shrouded in snow:
Seeking after that sweet golden clime Arise from their graves and aspire,
Where the travellers journey is done Where my Sun-flower wishes to go.

William Blake (1794)

As you can see, and as it has been established by a number of stylisticians (Donald Freeman, Keith 1966) the poem is a series of sub-clauses and so the flower cannot have a main clause, a verb to act with. The flower is weary, counts steps, seeks after, wishes to go, but move it cannot. Yet if we imagine the tall flower on its stem counting the steps of the sun we can see that it follows the sun with its gaze as it rises in the east, reaches the zenith and sets in the west. What is the flower seeking? That sweet golden clime, which is then being qualified with sub-clauses as a 'where', a place where everyone aspires, where the travellers' journey is done. Done, means finished, not covering more ground, the end of voyage time, time the sun follower was weary of. The flower wants to arrive, but cannot, desire is there, fulfilment is not. A simple drawing of the poem would show that at one point, probably in the west somewhere, there is the sweet golden clime where every traveller, the flower, the sun, the Youth, the virgin all are headed for. The direction is west and in the picture that can be indicated with arrows, all pointing towards the sweet golden clime, the desired containment. Where do the travellers come from? The flower comes from the spot where it rooted in the ground, the Youth and the virgin come from their graves and the sun from the horizon: the starting containment in each case is the earth. It is common knowledge that when the seeds are ripe, the sunflower will bend its head towards the ground for the seeds to fall down, go under the ground and rise in spring. Generation after generation, the flower will grow around the same place and there is no way out of the vegetable cycle: the renewed flower

will again turn its face towards the sun, ripen, go under, and come up to start again. This parallels the snow-shrouded virgin's story, where the reference is probably to Persephone, (Keith 1966) Demeter's daughter, who has to spend winter in Hades, and comes back to the Earth only in spring. But does the sun ever stop in its journey across the sky? Day after day he never breaks out of the circle. Why would the Youth, understood to be Narcissus (Keith 1966), who died of love for himself, of an impossible desire, want to break out of the grave? Is his new desire any more realistic than the deadly one proved to be? From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* IV 192 we know that Clytie, a nymph, had been in love with the sun, but Apollo turned her into a heliotrope, a sunflower, creating an unbridgeable distance between the two of them. The flower's hopeless yearning for the love of the sun is thus taken for granted, but it does not make the sweet golden clime simply a place where sun and flower could meet, for this place is everyone else's paradise, a shared containment. Whoever is 'in' there, seems to be blissfully happy. Taking into consideration that the other two flower poems, My pretty ROSE TREE and THE LILLY that appear on the same plate with AH! SUN-FLOWER are concerned about love, it can be surmised that love is a common topic in all the three poems, which in turn suggests that the sweet golden clime could symbolise not real but little death, a wish for freedom of preordained loveless trajectories. The west, where the sun, and consequently everyone else, was heading, at the time Blake wrote the poem, was associated with America, the land of freedom (Damon 1924). Going west, desiring freedom and love are clearly coded in the poem and harmonize with Blake's protest against "binding with briars my joys and desires", (The garden of love)," mind-forged manacles" (London), or being "bound and weary" (Infant Sorrow). However, desire is not fulfilment: if we chart the movements of the never-stopping desired and the wishful desiring the Ah! in the title will rather sound melancholy than hopeful.

Generic field	
Actor	<u>Movement</u> <i>Direction</i>
Semantic field desired	Semantic fields desiring
Sun	Sunflower, <u>counts</u> , <u>wishes</u> , <i>west</i>
<u>Steps</u>	Youth, <u>arises</u> , <u>aspires</u> , <i>west</i>
<i>round and round E-W</i>	virgin, <u>arises</u> , <u>aspires</u> , <i>west</i>

Blend
 Desired / Desiring never meet
 VISION: DISTANCE

The poem describes an after event state: the sun had already transformed the nymph into a flower, Narcissus had already been laid in his grave, Persephone had already been ordained to spend winter in the underworld. Fates have been decided, desire will be eternal and unfulfilled. There is no time and space, no sweet golden clime where the actors could meet; they are contained in their distance, in their separate plights, from the coveted union.

3. Patterns of time and place in Sunflower Sutra

Ginsberg was much moved by reading Blake's sunflower poem. He felt as if he had heard Blake's own voice recite the poem and had a quasi physical reaction to it: "Kind of like the top of my head coming off, letting in the rest of the universe connected to my own brain" (Ginsberg:1966:40) He set music to the poem and sang it with Orlovsky (internet source, see references) in a deep guttural way similar to the way sutras are sung and wrote his own sunflower prayer inspired by the Blake experience. I quote below the whole of Ginsberg's poem, indicating East and West references in bold, and appearances of the locomotive and the sunflower in italics.

Sunflower Sutra

I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock
and

sat down under the huge shade of a *Southern Pacific locomotive* to look at the **sunset** over the
box house hills and cry.

Jack Kerouac sat beside me on a busted rusty iron
pole, companion, we thought the same
thoughts
of the soul, bleak and blue and sad-eyed,
surrounded by the gnarled steel roots of trees
of
machinery.

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky,
sun

sank on top of **final Frisco peaks**, no fish in
that
stream, no hermit in those mounts, just

ourselves
rheumy-eyed and hungover like old bums
on the riverbank, tired and wily.
Look at *the Sunflower*, he said, there was a dead
gray
shadow against the sky, big as a man, sitting
dry on top of a pile of ancient sawdust--
--I rushed up enchanted--it was *my first sunflower*,
memories of Blake--my visions--**Harlem**
and Hells of **the Eastern rivers**, bridges clanking
Joes
Greasy Sandwiches, dead baby carriages,
black
treadless tires forgotten and unretreaded, the
poem of the riverbank, condoms & pots, steel
knives, nothing stainless, only the dank muck
and the razor-sharp artifacts passing into the
past--
and *the gray Sunflower* poised against the sunset,
crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and
smog
and smoke of *olden locomotives* in its eye--
corolla of bleary spikes pushed down and broken
like
a battered crown, seeds fallen out of its face,
soon-to-be-toothless mouth of sunny air,
sunrays
obliterated on its hairy head like a dried
wire spiderweb,
leaves stuck out like arms out of the stem, gestures
from the sawdust root, broke pieces of plaster
fallen out of the black twigs, a dead fly in its
ear,
Unholy battered old thing you were, *my sunflower*
O
my soul, I loved you then!
The grime was no man's grime but death and
human
locomotives,
all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad
skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black

mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or
protuberance
of artificial worse-than-dirt--industrial--
modern--all that civilization spotting your
crazy golden crown--
and those blear thoughts of death and dusty loveless
eyes and ends and withered roots below, in
the
home-pile of sand and sawdust, rubber dollar
bills, skin of machinery, the guts and innards
of the weeping coughing car, the empty
lonely
tincans with their rusty tongues alack, what
more could I name, the smoked ashes of
some
cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and
the
milky breasts of cars, wornout asses out of
chairs
& sphincters of dynamos--all these
entangled in your mummied roots--and you there
standing before me in the **sunset**, all your
glory
in your form!

*A perfect beauty of a sunflower! a perfect excellent
lovely sunflower existence! a sweet natural
eye
to the new hip moon, woke up alive and
excited
grasping in the sunset shadow sunrise golden
monthly breeze!*

How many flies buzzed round you innocent of your
grime, while you cursed the heavens of the
railroad and your *flower soul*?

*Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a
flower? when did you look at your skin and
decide you were an impotent dirty old
locomotive?
the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and
shade of a once powerful mad American
locomotive?*

*You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you
were a
sunflower!*
*And you Locomotive, you are a locomotive, forget
me
not!*
So I grabbed up the *skeleton thick sunflower* and
stuck
it at my side like a scepter,
and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack's soul
too, and anyone who'll listen,
--We're not our skin of grime, we're not our *dread
bleak dusty imageless locomotive*, we're all
beautiful golden sunflowers inside, we're
blessed
by our own seed & golden hairy naked
accomplishment-bodies growing into *mad
black
formal sunflowers in the sunset*, spied on by
our
eyes under the shadow of the *mad
locomotive*
riverbank **sunset Frisco** hilly tincan **evening**
sitdown vision.

Allen Ginsberg

Berkeley, 1955

The story, then, is that the two beats, having crossed America east to west in the wake of Whitman's Locomotive in Winter, see a grimy sunflower that makes Ginsberg remember his Blake-induced vision in Harlem and makes him realise that perfection lies inside us, not outside in the far west, in industrial progress. The specter of the flower becomes a sceptre, a vision of illumination. My America, my new found land, says Donne, about his mistress' body, and similarly Ginsberg finds an American dream not in the once powerful locomotive that goes out west but in the blessed golden bodies, the sunflower soul inside us.

The emerging structure is charted in the following figure:

Generic field		
Actor	<u>Movement</u>	<i>Direction</i>

Semantic field desired

Sunflower

Appears

In the west, old, outside
In the east, young, inside

Semantic fields desiring

Ginsberg and Kerouac go out west

Ginsberg thinks back east

Blend

Desired / Desiring unite Inside
VISION: CLOSENESS

Perhaps one might question why the locomotive is not in the desired semantic field, albeit as a failed attempt, but something once desired. In Whitman's poem it would be there with lines like:

“Fierce-throated beauty!

Roll through my chant with all thy lawless music, thy swinging lamps at night
, Thy madly-whistled laughter, echoing, rumbling like an earthquake, rousing
all,

Law of thyself complete, thine own track firmly holding,”

but that was in 1876 when the trans-American railway could represent a dream. However, in 1955 Ginsberg, sitting in the shadow of the locomotive that has gone out west, finds it no longer appealing. Ginsberg is capable of discarding the wrong choice; in his poem desire meets with fulfilment.

“--We're not our skin of grime, we're not our *dread*
bleak dusty imageless locomotive, we're all
beautiful golden sunflowers inside,”

The containment change, moving from one state to another, was not possible in Blake's poem, but Ginsberg says we may be contained in this industrial world, but what we contain inside is what we are. In both poems there is after-event tiredness: “weary of time” and “tired and wily”. But while in the Blake poem weariness goes with an acceptance of an outside factor that cannot be changed, time, Ginsberg's beats are tired, but still wily. Wily, according to the Longman dictionary means: clever in tricks, esp. for getting what one wants: a wily fox. Ginsberg will wake up alive and excited, will find *sunset shadow sunrise*, will break the spell of the junkyard and go for inner nature. Not so the Sun-flower who cannot break out of the seemingly unending vegetable cycle, yet is, like human beings would be, weary of time. We do not know of plants if they are

aware of the passing of time or not. Indeed, there is an occurrence of the phrase that separates man from beasts just on this criterion:

"Repining Man, for what is past,
Hating the present what they see,
Frighted with what's to come at last:
Beasts pleas'd with what is, and must be.
Ease Man doth hate, and Business store;
A burthen to himself he is:
Weary of time, yet wishes more:
Beasts all these Vanities they miss."

Margaret Cavendish: *Nature Picture* (1671)

The Sun-flower is weary of the time that separates it from the sun, but could a nymph metamorphosed into a heliotrope ever reach a celestial body? According to Freud (1905) sexual energy drives us either to seek features of our parents or ourselves in love, looking for similarity or identity. He calls these anaclitical and narcissistic choices. In the case of the Sun-flower, distance makes the anaclitical choice impossible, and if we add the narcissistic choice exemplified in the poem by the two graves of the youth and the virgin, clearly the human-like flower had reason for weariness. Wily Ginsberg, however, if we are just looking at the structure of out and in, seeing that the forefathers-resembling choice of the locomotive dream proved wrong, turned inward to find a more human, a sunflower existence. Expressions of toward and away from in metaphoric language emotionally correspond to like and dislike, love and fear. When in embodied metaphors the poems show directions in movement, the reader reacts emotionally, too, moving toward the desired object and away from the undesired. Ray Gibbs in his article significantly entitled: Feeling moved by metaphor (Gibbs:2001) brings the example of how moved Ginsberg was when first reading Blake's Sun-flower poem. Ginsberg identified himself with the Sun-flower so much that even the sunlit roofs of New York he saw from the window seemed to him like the sweet golden clime. This first identification he then carried on to the Sutra

As the poet's experience finds its way into the poem, so frames, pointers of reference rise from the poem and aid reader interpretation.

4. Pointers in both sunflower poems

Pointers point to other texts and common knowledge that dialogue with the text just scrutinized, creating contextual blends. The role of the pointers is to facilitate intertextual negotiation. Pointers conjure up extra - textual information which will contribute to the interpretation. Pointers are complex, ranging from

obvious to rare, from generally known to very personal. A basic pointer, for example, would be conceptual metaphors.

Source	Target
JOURNEY	LIFE, LOVE
MOVEMENT	TIME
ARRIVAL	DEATH
ONE DAY	HUMAN LIFE, LIFE
PLANT	HUMAN LIFE CYCLES

Both poems involve journeys, even if the Sun-flower only travels in its mind. The men and the locomotive arrive after crossing America and in fact their arrival is at the same time the death of the idea that made them go so far west. The strange connection between movement, arrival, or rather the lack of them and the endless series of days when the flower just counts the steps of the sun create an intriguing effect. A trapped journey, a trapped life, a tantalising experience. There is tension between expected life cycles and unperturbed desire. Ginsberg's flower, although at first it shows the ravages of industrial time but as soon as it becomes the vision, it turns timelessly golden. Both the linear progression of industrial time and cyclical natural time dissolve in golden, see sweet golden clime and golden sunflowers inside.

A number of pointers have already been mentioned above, such as extra textual semantic fields that are conjured up and colour the understanding of the text in question. An example is Ovid's story of Clytie, which brings with itself a whiff of ancient mythology, a perhaps, of being reminded of Persephone, Demeter, Hades by the image of the virgin shrouded in snow.

Style can work as a pointer. A stylistic pointer is the poetic diction Blake uses: Ah! Sun-flower, countest, seaking, clime. It brings in an archaic atmosphere, a romantic mood. The telegraphic style used in this short poem may suggest mystery, meaningful opacity. In the long poem the word sutra is a pointer to Buddhist prayers and the enumerative style of resounding free verse and the reference to the locomotive point to Whitman.

The junkyards of the Sutra mixes industrial waste with human body parts, sexual organs, some named with four-letter words, strange, dissonant, pointing to unrelated semantic fields. Yet the image of the milky breasts of cars is beautiful: the pointers bring in discordant fields which blend into poetry in the text.

Ginsberg's Sutra negotiates between two signature pointers: Ah! Sun-flower and To a Locomotive in Winter. The pointer nature of flower and locomotive appears only later in the poem. When we first meet a Southern Pacific

Locomotive, in whose shade the two friends are sitting, it is only a locomotive that happens to be there. Likewise when Kerouac points out the sunflower it is only a feature of the place and does not become a pointer until it is associated with Blake. Then step by step the locomotive emerges as an image of the American Dream and with the fact of that it has crossed the continent, and the declamatory style of the verse, the association with Whitman appears. The pointers then start their in-poem idiosyncratic development: the locomotive is rejected as imageless; the sunflower is adopted as a vision, an inner union of body and soul. The turns and twists of this negotiation are italicized in the poem quoted above.

5. Conclusion

The system of tracing textual patterns of deixis, in our case place and time movement, and looking for pointers that lead to other texts under scrutiny or just to common knowledge seemed to work well in the intertextual stylistic analysis of the two sunflower poems. It may even work for texts in general or any other texts where patterns and pointers are foregrounded. I think the method of establishing directions inside and leading away from the texts can reveal the network of connections: how the texts are built up and how they are contextualized.

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