

CHAPTER 3-3

FINE ARTS: LITERATURE



Figure 1. Rugged shorelines such as this with a bank of moss (*Grimmia maritima*) inspire poems that relate the ruggedness of the moss. Photo by Michael Lüth.

Stories and Verse

I most expected to find mosses in the Haiku poetry book I found at a used book sale, but alas, not a single poem mentioned a moss. However, a less likely occurrence is the theme of a Japanese opera developed around a moss! In Volume 1, Chapter 9-5 on light I have described this story, which is developed around the luminous properties of the cave moss, *Schistostega pennata*.

One famous quote includes a moss: "The rolling stone gathereth no moss." Although old, this quote is still used to remind us that we need to keep busy. It is too bad that it treats the moss as a symbol of laziness.

Hawthorne (1996) uses mosses to describe a scene in "The Old Manse, Preface to Mosses:" "Looking down into the river, I once discovered some heavy fragments of the timbers, all green with half-a-century's growth of water-moss; for during that length of time, the tramp of horses and human footsteps have ceased, along this ancient highway." This theme of representing the passage of time is a common use of mosses in poetry.

John Ruskin discovered mosses late in life, stating "It is mortifying enough to write, - but I think thus much ought to be written, - concerning myself as the author of Modern Painters. In three months I shall be fifty years old; and I don't at this hour - ten o'clock in the morning of the two hundred and sixty-eighth day of my forty-ninth year - know what 'moss' is. He did indeed get introduced to moss, examining the "emerald green velvet" of a brick, and later wrote, "No words that I know of will say what these mosses are. None are delicate enough, none perfect enough, none rich enough." Kendall (1926) says of him, "To Ruskin, mosses were no mere botanical pigeonhole - they were a fresh pasture for his thought. With the bright thread of his fancy he wove them into the very texture of life."

Ruskin sees mosses as having particular roles in the natural world, with the adornment of rock as their principal role. Like many other poets, he refers to them as "soft mosses." And like so many others, he compares them to death, stating, "No other plants have so endless variety on so similar a structure as the mosses; and none teach us so well the Humility of Death. As for the death of our bodies,

we have learned, wisely, or unwisely, to look the fact of that in the face."

Mosses often represent the passing of time, as will be seen in several of the poems here. Judson Crews, in his book, *The Clock of Moss*, writes about native peoples, farmers, and Penitentes in the Southwest, picturing the changing of the Southwest and the difficult journeys of the these people.

Shakespeare seems not to appreciate mosses as objects of beauty, but like so many poets considers them as signs of age.

In *Comedy of Errors*, Act II, Sc. 2:

"It is dross, usurping ivy, brier, or idle moss."

In *Titus Andronicus*, Act II, Sc. 3:

A barren, detested vale . . .

The trees, though summer, yet forlorn

Oercome with moss, and baleful mistletoe.

Occasionally an entire poem or story may be dedicated to moss, although it is more likely that mosses are used in the imagery. Some of these attempt to describe bryophytes in ways to rest the soul, but others tell stories from the perspective of the moss. Such is the poetic prose by the Indian writer Uma Narayan (*The Adirondack Review*):

Gathering Moss

Surely the stone would not suddenly find itself encased in a velvet muff of moss if it merely stopped rolling; after all, it might come to a standstill in a spot that lacked the moist good moss requires. Piles of sedentary stone have stood in sandy deserts, bleached by sun, unspckled by moss. There was no moss on indolent moon rocks; lunar vegetation would have made the headlines, provoked thoughtful interviews with Carl Sagan. Evidently, many stationary stones manage to miss out on moss. There is more to moss than mere halting – unplanned fluke, serendipity. Knowing that, it may make more sense to accept the loss of moss, and enjoy the rough adventures of rolling, despite the implications of downward mobility. You wake up in a different place each day and never grow bored or outstay your welcome. You travel without a passport, see the world without paying for transport. You careen down mountains scaring hikers, go rafting in unruly waters, surrender to slope, to gravity. Moss requires tradeoffs, and one of them is staying put in a damp spot. Some stones may find real satisfaction in settled tranquility, in providing space for green growth. Other pebbles have precipitate souls, value exuberance, cultivate the arts of falling fluently, and embrace the spry delights of a mossless life. In this matter of moss, as in many others, there are pluralities of possibility, a rich variety of ways to be stone.

Theodore Roethke (1944) expresses guilt as he writes about *Moss Gathering* (see Peck 2006; Figure 2), and like Narayan, also making the moss the subject of the writing:

To loosen with all ten fingers held wide and limber
And lift up a patch, dark green, the kind for lining
cemetery baskets,

Thick and cushiony, like an old-fashioned doormat,
The crumbling small hollow sticks on the underside
mixed with roots,
And wintergreen berries and leaves still stuck to the
top,-

That was moss-gathering.

But something always went out of me when I dug
those loose carpets

Of green, or plunged my elbows in the spongy
yellowish moss of the marshes:

And afterwards I always felt mean, jogging back over
the logging road,

As if I had broken the natural order of things in that
swampland;

Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance,

By pulling off flesh from the living planet;

As if I had committed, against the whole scheme of
life, a desecration.



Figure 2. Jeri Peck would agree with Roethke as he writes, "Disturbed some rhythm, old and of vast importance, By pulling off flesh from the living planet." Here she records data on the impact of harvesting in the Pacific Northwest, USA, while examining a patch that has been loosened "with all ten fingers held wide and limber" and lifted up. Photo by Jeri Peck.

Edwards (1992) has analyzed the role of mosses in literature. He suggests that they moved from the maligned, being associated with death, to the benign, representing the accumulation of time. They also have represented stagnation and barrenness, but likewise may represent the "spark of green, or optimism in an otherwise bleak place." They can represent solitude, but they also represent haunting, which Edwards suggests may be due to their habit of growing on tombstones.

Ando (1990) summarizes similar associations with "koke," the Japanese word for moss. These comprise four groups: 1) old age, antiquity, solemnity, 2) Beauty, quiet, elegance, 3) seclusion, simplicity, loneliness, and 4) desolation, retrospection, mutability, death.

Poetry

The poets seem to think of mosses in two extremes, one as the delicate beings on the forest floor, requiring moisture and refuge from the sun (Figure 3), and the other as rugged and enduring, living where nothing else can (Figure 1). This short verse by Willis Boyd Allen describes the delicate nature of woodland mosses:

Children of lowly birth,
Pitifully weak;
Humblest creatures of the wood
To your peaceful brotherhood
Sweet the promise that was given
Like the dew from heaven:
'Blessed are the meek,
They shall inherit the earth'
Thus are the words fulfilled:
Over all the earth
Mosses find a home secure.
On the desolate mountain crest,
Avalanche-ploughed and tempest-tilled,
The sweet mosses rest;
On shadowy banks of streamlets pure,
Kissed by the cataracts shifting spray,
For the bird's small foot a soft highway
For the many and one distressed.
Little sermon of peace.



Figure 3. "On shadowy banks of streamlets pure, Kissed by the cataracts shifting spray." Here *Platyhypnidium riparioides* fulfills the poet's verse. Photo by Michael Lüth.

A. Muriel Saunders wrote "*Sphagnum Moss*," describing the virtues of using peatmosses for bandages:

The doctors and the nurses
Look North with eager eyes,
And call on us to send them
The dressing that they prize,
No other is its equal –
In modest bulk it goes,
Until it meets the gaping wound
Where the red life blood flows,
Then spreading, swelling in its might,
It checks the fatal loss,
And kills the germ, and heals the hurt –
The kindly *Sphagnum Moss*.

Marshall (1907) includes a varied collection of poetry and prose where mosses help to describe the nature of

things. When he discusses using moss for chinking and filling cracks, he compares this to uses by birds in building their nests (Figure 4) by quoting a poem by Claire, **The Thrush's Nest**:

Within a thick and spreading hawthorn bush
That overhung a molehill large and round,
I heard from morn to morn a merry thrush
Sing hymns of rapture, while I drank the
Sound with joy – and oft an unintruding guest,
I watched her secret toils from day to day;
How true she warped the moss to form her nest,
And modell'd it within with wood and clay.



Figure 4. "How true she warped the moss to form her nest," this bird's nest is constructed of dead plant material with living mosses woven among it. Photo by Jeri Peck.

Marshall (1907) begins his chapter entitled "Leafy Mosses" with this poem (Figure 5):

The tiny moss, whose silken verdure clothes
The time-worn rock, and whose bright capsules rise,
Like fairy urns, on stalks of golden sheen,
Demand our admiration and our praise,
As much as cedar, kissing the blue sky,
Or Krubul's giant flower. God made them all,
And what He deigns to make should ne'er be deemed
Unworthy of our study and our love.



Figure 5. "The time-worn rock, and whose bright capsules rise, Like fairy urns, on stalks of golden sheen," aptly describes this *Ortrhotrichum pulchellum*, although this species grows on bark of trees. Photo by Michael Lüth.

The delicate and peaceful nature of mosses have inspired poets, as this one by Richard Henry Dana, 1972, **The Moss Supplicateth for the Poet** (Figure 6):

Though I am humble, slight me not,
But love me for the Poet's sake;
Forget me not till he's forgot,
For care of slight with him I take.

For oft he passed the blossoms by
And turned to me with kindly look;
Left flaunting flowers and open sky,
And wooed me by the shady brook.

* * *

They said the world he fain would shun,
And seek the still and twilight wood, -
His spirit, weary of the sun,
In humblest things found chiefest good;

That I was of a lowly frame,
And far more constant than the flower,
Which, vain with many a boastful name,
But fluttered out its idle hour;

That I was kind to old decay,
And wrapped it softly round in green, -
On naked root, and trunk of gray,
Spread out a garniture and screen.

* * *

He praised my varied hues, - the green,
The silver hoar, the golden, brown;
Said, lovelier hues were never seen;
Then gently pressed my tender down.

And where I sent up little shoots,
He called them trees, in fond conceit:
Like silly lovers in their suits
He talked, his care awhile to cheat.



Figure 6. *Grimmia elongata* demonstrates "He praised my varied hues, - the green, The silver hoar, the golden, brown." Photo by Michael Lüth.

Carol Reed-Jones tells how she develops a list poem, in this case first listing all the things she sees in the woods. Then she must think how they relate to each other and how she can use the senses to describe them. Thus, she adds moisture and texture to the green color of the moss to make the image come alive (Figure 7):

In the Woods

In the woods, scraps of fog
drape themselves
like gray scarves on the trees.
In the woods,
frogs sing and crows squawk,
and one heron flaps past on silent wings.
In the woods, blooming plants
exhale a sweet perfume,
and the taste of green growing things
is in the air.
In the woods, each tree
wears soft, moist green moss
over its rough, dry bark.



Figure 7. Here every tree "wears the soft, green moss" *Eurhynchium praelongum*. Photo by Michael Lüth.

One reference that seems common in the use of mosses in literature is that they are "soft underfoot," as Edwards (1993a) points out. He found fifteen occurrences of such a reference.

Rugged Mosses

It seems it is often the smallness that is stressed, and seldom the ruggedness, but these poems show that the tenacity of such a small plant gives hope that we too can survive adversity. This wonderful little poem, *Ode to Grimmia*, Anonymous, p. 433, describing *Grimmia* as only a bryologist could (Figure 8), may not be anonymous, but I have only a photocopy and a page number, with no indication of where it came from. If you can identify its source, please help me out!

Ode to *Grimmia*

The most casual talker, if he be a walker,
is surely acquainted with moss;
He will say it's a thing that to grow needs a spring,
leafy shade, and a log to emboss.
But he's wrong three times over; he's yet to discover
there's a moss which is doughty and tough;
One he's likely to see, and dismiss thoughtlessly
as dead, brown, old fungus-like stuff.
Bravely crowning a rock, this is pure mossy stock,
air, it's dry, yes, but far from inert;
Give one drop of rain – it will turn green again!
And resume making moss leaves, unhurt.
It can manage drought slyly, knowing poikilohydry,

like its kin in the genus of *Grimmia*,
Which from bare alpine col to the seer chaparral
make hard boulders seem soft and familiar.



Figure 8. *Grimmia arenaria* demonstrates the brown-black moss as described in *Ode to Grimmia*. Photo by Michael Lüth.

Thomas James Allen seems also to find moss in those dreary places in his four poem parts called "Moss Upon the Brick." But in the end, the endurance of the moss gives him hope:

Moss Upon The Brick - Part 1

In an older part of town,
Covered far and green and thick,
An ancient house, an antique home,
With moss upon the brick.

A window's broken, boards are split,
The clocks inside have stopped,
The pictures hung upon the walls
Have bent their nails and dropped.

A fence outside surrounds the house,
The gate squeaks with the breeze,
The yard is filled from left to right
With dying grass and trees.

The road untravelled past the house
Is muddy, brown and slick,
And the sidewalk from the house
Has moss upon the brick.

Moss Upon The Brick - Part 2

The children discover the ancient house
That townsfolk pass by quick,
A haunted place with summer weeds,
And moss upon the brick.

They sneak inside through an open door
That leads into a hall,
An empty spiderweb above
Is stretched from wall to wall.

They wander past the dining room,
That's lit through broken panes,
The rug on the floor below the chairs
Is soiled by coffee stains.

The kitchen with its well-worn tiles
Is empty, dark and cold;
A hardened breadcrumb on the floor
Is covered with blue mold.

The children wander past the stairs,
They're walking hand in hand;
They're frightened by an old umbrella,
Discarded in a corner stand.

All at once the wind blows hard
And slams a door upstairs;
The children race back through the rooms,
Disturbing rugs and chairs.

Back home they run with screaming cries,
For Nature's played a trick;
They'll never come to play in the house
With moss upon the brick.

Moss Upon The Brick - Part 3

A November walk down an old rutted road
Through a fog, though misty and thick,
I've ventured to see that old rustic house,
With moss upon the brick.

The sun has been swallowed behind the dark clouds,
The air is bitter and chilled,
The winds change from North to East to South-
South-West, but never are stilled.

The weeds growing thick by the edge of the house,
Live now, while others cannot,
They thrive in the cold with the wind and the snow,
Instead of the summertime hot.

The apple trees dropped their fruits in the yard
When nobody came to call,
The red and the yellow lie mixed with the brown
Of the leaves that were dropped in the Fall.

A November day in the life of the house,
Like others of future or past,
Does little to change the brick and the wood,
Or the darkened shadows cast.

An early Fall snow still clings to the roof,
And ice makes the sidewalk slick,
But the wind and the cold can never remove
The moss upon the brick.

Moss Upon The Brick - Part 4

Now I have grown old, my hair has turned gray,
The passage of time was so quick;
I wonder if years have weathered the house
With moss upon the brick?

I remember the house as it was in my youth,
I'm drawn down the muddy lane;
The trees, the walk, the peeling paint,
The broken window pane.

Why, even in my day, the boards on the porch,
From lying so long were sore,
They'd bent their necks and arched their backs,
Pulling their nails from the floor.

I wonder if years have caved in the roof?
If the weeds are growing thick?
If wind and rain have even left
A brick upon a brick?

I'm nearing the house, I'm afraid to look,
I laugh, my fearing is odd;

I'd always supposed the house would stand strong,
Like mountains, or faith in a god.

But mountains with time have melted away,
And I've had my faith in God shaken,
And someday the earth will not turn 'round the sun,
Oh what is this risk that I've taken?

If I shatter a memory by returning to see
Whether my childhood world is the same,
And finding that things are not as I left them,
I've only myself to blame.

My hand on the gate, I look up the walk,
My heart turns the clock back a tick;
My faith, my life saved! - for there stands the house,
With moss upon the brick.

Among the more famous bryological poems (at least among bryologists) is the one by Mungo Park, written about his African travels when he thought he would surely die in the desert, with no compass and no food, but who gained the hope he needed upon seeing a lowly moss, a small *Fissidens*, green and growing (Crum 1973; Figure 9). Park wrote in his journal, "Can that Being (thought I), who planted, watered, and brought to perfection in this obscure part of the world a thing which appears of so small importance, look with unconcern upon the situation and sufferings of creatures formed after his own image? Surely not! Reflections like these would not allow me despair. I started up, and disregarding both hunger and fatigue, travelled forward, assured that relief was at hand." He did indeed survive to reach hospitable land.:

Sad, faint and weary, on the sand
Our traveller sat him down; his hand
Cover'd his burning head.
Above, beneath, behind, around,
No resting for the eye he found;
All nature seemed as dead.

One tiny tuft of moss alone,
Mantling with freshest green a stone,
Fix'd his delighted gaze;
Through bursting tears of joy he smiled,
And while he raised the tendril wild,
His lips o'erflowed with praise.

Oh! shall not He who keeps thee green,
Here in the waste, unknown, unseen,
Thy fellow-exile save?
He who commands the dew to feed
Thy gentle flower, can surely lead
Me from a scorching grave.

Thy tender stalks, and fibres fine,
Here find a shelter from the storm;
Perhaps no human eye but mine
Ere gazed upon thy lovely form.

He that form'd thee, little plant,
And bade thee flourish in this place,
Who sees and knows my every want,
Can still support me with His grace.



Figure 9. *Fissidens bryoides*, identified by W. J. Hooker, surviving in the desert soil, brought hope to Mungo Park as he was about to give up all hope. Photo by Michael Lüth.

Winter seems to inspire mention of mosses, when all else is dark and grey, as in this verse by George Crabbe called **Tales of the Hall**:

All green was banished save of pine and yew,
That still displayed their melancholy hue;
Save the green holly with its berries red,
And the green moss that o'er the gravel spread.

But Whittier, in **Mogg Megone**, Pt. III, speaks of spring, when other plants overtake the mosses:

'Tis spring-time on the eastern hills!
Like torrents gush the summer rills,
Through winter's moss and dry dead leaves
The bladed grass revives and lives,
Pushes the mouldering waste away,
And glimpses to the April day.

The freshness of rainfall likewise makes the mosses stand out, inspiring the poet, as Alfred Tennyson writes in **The Lotos Eaters: Choric song**:

Here are cool mosses deep,
And thro' the moss the ivies creep.

One anonymous poem appeared in the *Bryological Times* 96 in 1998 as lyrics of a song sung by the students in a peatlands bryophytes course in Finland in 1997:

Ten Keen Bryologists

Ten keen bryologists
Were learning bryophytes,
one of them got stuck in those,
but nine spent all their nights!

Nine freak bryologists
went out into a mire,
one of them got grilled in there,
but eight survived the fire!

Eight smart bryologists went out into a bog,
one found too much *Sphagnum* there,
the rest got through the fog!

Seven dumb bryologists went out into a fen,
one discovered two bears there,
the others passed the den!

Six sane bryologists collected more mass samples,
one mistook it all for spinach
five needed no example!

Five lax bryologists
took a break with sauna,
one got broiled like a fish,
the rest remained living fauna!

Four wise bryologists,
jumped into a river,
one of them jumped down the rapids,
three cared not a shiver!

Three sure bryologists
identified Mniaceae,
one took *Mnium* for a *Bryum*,
two were like Timo so crazy!

Two brave bryologists
were walking near the border,
one saw a Russian endemic,
the other returned in order!

One lone bryologist
liked bryophytes, so then
he looked for nine more bryophiles
and started again as ten!

Some poetry is just for fun and expresses the author's state of mind. This anonymous 1996 poem, published in *Bull. Brit. Bryol. Soc.* 67: 45, most likely by a student, expresses the trials and tribulations of dealing with bryophyte systematics (Figure 10 - Figure 13):

Modern studies in *Drepanocladus*
Lars Hedenäs of Sweden,
By the Nine Gods he swore,
The genus *Drepanocladus*
Should trouble us no more.

The concept was old-fashioned
Just taxonomic tedium,
So he split it into several parts,
And one of them's *Scorpidium*.

Perplexed and puzzled by the rest,
He paused to scratch his ear,
And after labours long and hard,
Arrived at *Warnstorfia*.

Axillary hairs he laboured o'er,
And peristomial matters,
And other trivial details which
Will drive us mad as hatters.

At last he faced the final rump
'Now what on earth'll I call this?'
Then final inspiration struck –
And gave us *Hamatocaulis*.

Now sound his reasons may well be,
For splitting, and not lumping,
But as I struggle with new names,
I'm half inclined to thump him.

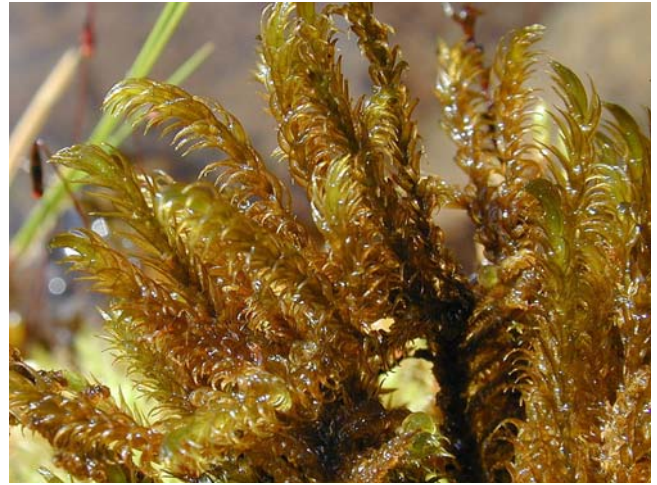


Figure 10. The traditional genus *Drepanocladus* has few remaining species, now including this *D. sendtneri*, as Hedenäs has attempted to "trouble us no more." Photo by Michael Lüth.



Figure 11. Hedenäs concluded that this member of *Drepanocladus* should be moved to *Scorpidium* as *S. revolvens*. Others, such as Blockeel (2000) still include it in *Drepanocladus*. Photo by Michael Lüth.



Figure 12. Once called *Drepanocladus exannulatus*, Hedenäs has renamed this one *Warnstorfia exannulatus*. Photo by Michael Lüth.



Figure 13. And another once named *Drepanocladus vernicosus*, this one is now *Hamatocaulis vernicosus*. It seems that Hedenäs has solved the problems of *Drepanocladus* by removing most of its species! This seems to have resulted in no less consternation by his student, as lamented in the poem, **Modern Studies in *Drepanocladus***. Photo by Michael Lüth.

There are many translations of a poem by the Chinese poet Wang Wei, where in the end it is the moss that is given importance (Figure 14). I prefer this one by W. J. B. Fletcher in 1919:

So Lone seem the hills; there is no one in sight there.
But whence is the echo of voices I hear?
The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest,
And in their reflection green mosses appear.

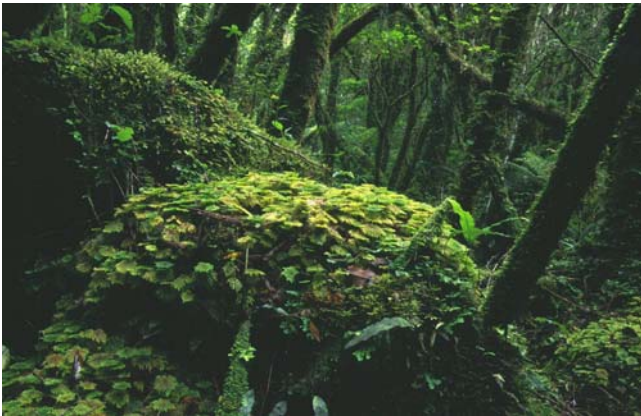


Figure 14. *Hypnodendron menziesii*, showing "The rays of the sunset pierce slanting the forest, And in their reflection green mosses appear." Photo by Jan-Peter Frahm.

It is seldom that mosses figure in such touching dramas and struggles as seen in the works of Walt Whitman in his twelve-poem sequence, "Live Oak, with Moss." In 1858 or 1859, Whitman described one man's love for another, the happiness they shared, and the aftermath of that relationship (Parker 1996). But that sequence, in its original form and presentation of honest struggles, was never published. Rather, a revised version, missing the comma, was ultimately published as "Live Oak with Moss" within a forty-five poem "Calamus" section of the 1860 *Leaves of Grass*. The original "Live Oak, with Moss," finally published by Bowers in 1953 (see Parker 1996), gives an honest rendition of the struggle and feelings of a man's love for a man while living in a world of homophobia.

In contrast to the usual imagery and friendly moss names, it seems that in recent works in Great Britain, scientific names of mosses may appear in literary works. For example, in Dulcie Domum's "Bad Housekeeping" (The Guardian, 8 February 1992), she writes "Gertrude was seated on a mat of *Grimmia pulvinata* gazing thoughtfully out across glittering Rough Dike reservoir." (Edwards 1993a; Figure 15). Even less recently, Dutton, in "The Craggie" (1976) wrote "Remarkable woman," mused the Doctor, turning again to the wall. "Had an entire liverwort subspecies named after her – *Dicranodontium uncinatum* McHattii; should have been a genus – *Agenesia*." It is too bad that *Dicranodontium* is a moss, not a liverwort (Figure 16).



Figure 15. This *Grimmia pulvinata* hardly gives the image of "Gertrude was seated on a mat of *Grimmia pulvinata* gazing thoughtfully out across glittering Rough Dike reservoir," but it can form extensive mats, and those spiny looking hair tips are actually quite soft. Photo by Michael Lüth.



Figure 16. This moss, *Dicranodontium uncinatum*, is clearly not the liverwort as referenced in the words of Dutton. Perhaps it is best that poets stick to common names. They cannot be easily challenged and are usually more poetic. Photo by Michael Lüth.

Perhaps more commonly, mosses are used as a means of describing something else. In her poem describing the habit of burying daughters live with their dead fathers in Arabia, Anne Sexton (1981) again uses mosses as a means of showing the passing of time, writing:

The Moss of his Skin

It was only important
to smile and hold still,
to lie down beside him
and to rest awhile,
to be folded up together
as if we were silk,
to sink from the eyes of mother
and not to talk.
The black room took us
like a cave or a mouth
or an indoor belly.
I held my breath
and daddy was there,
his thumbs, his fat skull,
his teeth, his hair growing
like a field or a shawl.
I lay by the moss
of his skin until
it grew strange. My sisters
will never know that I fall
out of myself and pretend
that Allah will not see
how I hold my daddy
like an old stone tree.

Even in poetry, mosses are often associated with death and decay. John Greenleaf Whittier wrote, in **A Dream of Summer**:

The Night is Mother of the Day,
The Winter of the Spring,
And ever upon old Decay,
The greenest mosses cling.

And John Masefield wrote in **Vagabond**:

Dunno about Life – it's jest a tramp alone
From wakin'-time to doss,
Dunno about Death – it's jest a quiet stone
All over-grey wi' moss.

Emily Dickinson often wrote of death, so it is not surprising that mosses entered into her imagery. In "**I died for Beauty – but was scarce**," she uses it as her final image, signifying the passage of time as the moss covers our names (on the tombstone):

Adjusted in the Tomb
When one who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room –
He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
"For Beauty", I replied –
"And I – for Truth – Themselves are One –
We Brethren, are", He said –
And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night –
We talked between the Rooms –
Until the Moss had reached our lips –
And covered up – our names

A pleasant contrast to these morbid references to mosses is "The Thorn" by William Wordsworth (Everything2 2005). In this poem, of 22 stanzas, he starts by describing the thorn tree as sad, aging, and decrepit with lichens. Later, however, he describes the heap of earth the size of a child's grave by that same tree as more beautiful

than any he has seen because the moss growing there shines with all kinds of colors – olive green and scarlet bright. The moss looks like a skillfully woven patchwork with beautiful colors of green, red, and pearly white. Here, the moss seems to symbolize that life goes on despite death around it.

In The Bible

Old names and changes in language make it difficult to determine if any bryophytes are truly mentioned in the Bible. Most references to them seem shaky at best. Sean Edwards (1993b) has demonstrated this difficulty with several examples.

In the *Bible*, hyssop has dubious meaning. In Exodus 12:22, Leviticus 14:4, 6, 49-52, Numbers 19:6,18, and Hebrews 9:19, hyssop refers to use in procedures involving dipping it into blood or water and sprinkling it about. Again in Psalms 41:7 it was used to purge or cleanse, and in John 19:29 it was used as a sponge for vinegar. Scholars think different plants may have been used in these different examples, and there is no clear evidence any was a moss.

However, in I Kings 4:33, the "hyssop that springeth out of the wall" narrows the habitat enough to encourage the suggestion of a moss. Other possibilities include small wall ferns, and even species today known as hyssop are possible. However, Linnaeus, who was not known for his understanding of mosses, identified this text to refer to the moss *Bryum truncatulum*, now known as *Henediella truncata* (and formerly as *Pottia truncata*; Figure 17), stating that "The houses and walls of Jerusalem are clothed at their base with green moss, the smallest of all; Hasselquist sent me some and it is *Bryum truncatulum*. He similarly concludes that the other references to hyssop refer to moss, using the argument that all mosses absorb liquids and can be used as absorbents. The argument is, however, hardly proof.



Figure 17. *Henediella truncata*, once known as *Pottia truncata*, and before that as *Bryum truncatulum* was the guess of Linnaeus for the "hyssop that springeth out of the wall" (I Kings 4:33). Photo by Michael Lüth.

The saga does not end there, however, as Mr. Dickson subsequently identified what appears to be the same moss, collected from the location described in the *Bible*, as *Bryum pyriforme*, figured by Hedwig as *Gymnostomum fasciculare*, and now named as *Entosthodon fascicularis* (Edwards 1999; Figure 18).



Figure 18. This possible "hyssop that springeth out of the wall" is *Entosthodon fascicularis*, a moss. However, it is possible that the plant in question in the Bible was not a moss at all, but a tracheophyte, perhaps even a fern. Photo by Michael Lüth.

Literature and Bryophyte Names

Literature often plays a role in the naming of organisms. Sometimes it is because the organism reminds someone of a character or story. Sometimes the story dictates the behavior of the author. Such was the naming of *Buxbaumia* (Crum 1973). Johann Christian Buxbaum discovered the genus in 1712 and described it in 1728. He chose to name it after his father, but he recalled the story of the fox who was derided for asking for grapes, not for himself, of course, but for his sick mother. The modest Buxbaum left the moss unnamed. It was 1744 when Haller finally named the moss *Buxbaumia*.

Summary

Bryophytes have been literature to create imagery. Often they are used to create images of passing time, death, or other indications of aging. In some cases they are used to create an image of serenity. They sometimes appears in titles when they have no part in the actual story. The Bible seems to overlook them, with only a few references that use the word hyssop, which has multiple interpretations

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