Flowers (Part 1)

by

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Flowers that are attractive by reason of their forms, colors or scents have been admired and loved and cultivated for thousands of years; perhaps never more so, at least in Europe, than at the present day. Everyone knows, or thinks he knows, what a flower is: but not until a hundred or so years ago had the modem scientific point of view been applied to flowers, as to everything else. It is therefore necessary to take that point of view into account, because so many people think that it is the only point of view from which we can learn what a flower or anything else really is, or assign to it its proper place in the scheme of things.

From a scientific point of view, then, a flower of some sort is characteristic of all the class of Angiosperms, and, whether it be conspicuous and attractive or not, it is primarily a mechanism for securing the transfer of pollen from the anther of one flower to the stigma of another of the same species, usually in the case of conspicuous flowers, on the body of an insect. The form, color and fragrance of flowers is thought to have been evolved for the purpose of attracting insects, the intervention of which compensates for the immobility of plants and makes the impregnation of the ovule by the pollen of a distant individual possible. Alternatively, as everyone knows, pollen may be transported by wind; in such cases the flower is usually small and inconspicuous, though the inflorescence that carries a number of such flowers, and sometimes the flowers themselves, may be beautiful in our eyes. In either case, still from the scientific point of view, flowers have become what they are as a result of the interaction of a number of factors mainly connected with the relationship of plants to insects or to wind, and all such factors are in principle ascertainable, even though in practice they are not likely ever all to be ascertained. In so far as flowers are the indispensable precursors of useful seeds and fruits, with honey as a by-product in some cases, there is an obvious economic relationship between flowers and mankind, but scientifically speaking, all other kinds of relationship, aesthetic or otherwise, can only be regarded as accidental. Man happens to have taken advantage of such accidents and has tried to accentuate the pleasurable aspects of his relationship to flowers in his development of floriculture, but that fact does not alter the essentially accidental or non-essential nature of the relationship itself, regarded purely from the point of view of modem science.

This point of view in fact takes account of nothing but the immediate and tangible advantage, “economic” in the broad sense of the word, of the individual or of the race; it could therefore be described as purely utilitarian. It is assumed that the qualities and way of life of every living being, including man, can in principle be regarded primarily as expedients for securing the continuity of the existence of the

being or its race in the face of environmental pressures and competition from other beings or races; if any other influences are admitted they are regarded as secondary. There are scientists and philosophers of science who would say that even the above statement is tendentious, in that it makes use of such words as "advantage," "expedients" and "competition," and thereby suggests some kind of underlying purpose in the process of evolution and in existence generally; whereas according to them, there is no such purpose, terrestrial life having arisen purely through a fortuitous combination of circumstances, probably unique, and certainly destined eventually to be swallowed up in some equally fortuitous cataclysm. According to this view there exist only blind forces acting upon elementary particles, the resulting associations and dissociations of which constitute the universe and all that it contains. Thus all our experience, all our aspirations, every conception of beauty or goodness or greatness or of any kind of purpose, and of course any kind of theistic conception, while not necessarily negligible to us as human beings, can have no ultimate significance whatever. This is the philosophy of despair, of which Bertrand Russell is one of the chief exponents. It claims to expound the only intellectually acceptable basis for the development of a philosophy of life, and to represent the only possible logical and intelligent deduction from the discoveries of modern science. However that may be, the main characteristics and conclusions of the evolutionary hypothesis remain much the same, whether the process of evolution be regarded as being with or without some ultimate significance.

There are probably very few people who can accept in their hearts the view that existence is ultimately meaningless, independently of whether they are prepared to accept any particular religious or quasi-religious eschatology. But the conception of terrestrial life as a struggle for existence, in which every creature or race is fighting for its own advantage, inconsistent though it be with the general philosophy outlined above, has been thoroughly instilled into their minds by the protagonists of evolutionary ideas. It is of interest in passing to compare this point of view with another that was very prevalent in the 19th century, according to which everything on earth was created, not for its own advantage, nor for the advantage of its race, but for the benefit of mankind. It differed from the evolutionist point of view in being "creationist," and ostensibly founded on a religious rather than a scientific outlook. It perished partly because creationism was superseded by evolutionism, and partly because it met with insuperable difficulties in application, since it was necessary to argue that not only many things apparently useless to man, but also his worst enemies, were in fact created for his special and exclusive benefit. It was however very close to the more recent point of view in being essentially utilitarian; both are equally examples of the tendency to try to account for everything in terms of immediate and tangible advantage and disadvantage, which is none other than the materialist tendency. Not that considerations of immediate advantage and disadvantage are negligible or inoperative in terrestrial life, very far from it, but any theory founded on them alone is totally insufficient to account for the forms and the behavior of living beings, vegetable, animal and especially human, and no less insufficient to account for their existence, their variety and their qualities, and not least for their beauty; and that is the quality that appeals particularly to us in flowers.

The conception of a universal struggle for existence is in any case highly anthropomorphic, and it may be questioned whether it has any real meaning where a consciousness of individual existence, and *a*

fortiori of being engaged in a struggle, can scarcely be said to exist. It seems probable that our view of the world of nature as a conflict rather than a harmony is no more than evidence of our own state of mind, and that it is colored far more strongly than we suppose by that state of mind, according to whether it be internally harmonious or internally distraught. The floral picture at any rate manifests a joyous superfluity that accords ill with any conception so grim as that of a universal struggle for existence as the influence above all others that made that picture what it is, and has conferred on us the inexplicable and gratuitous benediction of flowers.

Struggle there is, obviously; but it is a result of the temporal limitations that obscure the underlying harmony, the harmony that shines forth from within in the inexplicable beauty of flowers. The struggle is as it were superficial; it does not constitute the basic force that moulds the world of nature, still less did it produce the beauty of flowers, as is postulated in evolutionist theories. The theory of course is that the more brilliant the flower the better its chances of attracting insects and thereby ensuring pollination and the perpetuation of its race. It sounds plausible, but it does not even fit the facts. The attractiveness of flowers to insects bears little relation to their brilliance or size. Lubbock pulled the petals off geraniums and found that insects visited them as before. The flowers of vines, of ivy, of box, of gooseberries, of sycamores, are small and green, yet they are objects of hot competition in the insect world, more so perhaps than most conspicuous flowers. *Cotoneaster horizontalis* has the least conspicuous flowers of any of its race, and is much the most attractive to insects. Neither lilies nor magnolias seem to be particularly attractive, whereas roses and poppies and peonies are so. There are also contrasts like that between the fig and the yucca, each dependent for pollination on one species of insect, small and specialized: the flowers of the fig are entirely hidden; the large white flowers of the yucca are flaunted in great plumes on stems many feet high. An abundant source of sugar, like the waste from a sugar factory, unadvertised though it be, is far more attractive to bees than the brightest of flowers. And so on. In short, the colors and forms of uncultivated flowers cannot be accounted for by any theory that confines its attention to their purely functional or utilitarian aspect.

Let us then assume without more ado that the beauty and fragrance of flowers is not an accident nor yet is it manifested for the exclusive and tangible benefit either of the plants themselves or of man. It can of course be maintained, with no possibility of proof either way, that man alone sees beauty as such; it is anyhow a commonplace that all men do not see it in the same way and that some appear to be totally indifferent to it. Hence the saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and so in one sense it is; but this saying can be interpreted in two different ways; either, on the one hand, that beauty is purely subjective and therefore has no intrinsic reality independently of its observer, or, on the other hand, that it has an intrinsic reality but is accessible to an individual only to the extent that he is attuned to it and no further. According to the first interpretation beauty is less than man and is a product of his nature; according to the second it is greater, or at least more universal, than the human individuality as such. The first interpretation alone is concordant with the scientific and evolutionary outlook; the second is not, because it takes account of something that is outside the purview of science, in that it implies that beauty is objective and universal, that its reality is independent of its manifestation in nature, and that therefore it is inherently mysterious, intangible and non-measurable. If that is so, beauty is by no means a fortuitous

attribute of matter; it is something of the universal manifested in the relative, or a manifestation of the infinite in the finite, and in that case, the real importance of beauty to us does not reside in its pleasurable or aesthetic aspect, but in its symbolism, or in its didactic potentiality. The traditional association of beauty with truth is then neither sentimental nor fanciful, for the positive qualities, among which is beauty, are immutable realities; only the material and perishable forms through which the ever-present potentialities of the qualities may be more or less imperfectly manifested are ephemeral. Materialism consists precisely in restricting attention to the perishable form; whether in its scientific or in its popular guise it is therefore opposed to all that a religion not tainted with materialism teaches, namely, that the material world can only be accounted for in terms of the non-material, the visible in terms of the invisible, the measurable in terms of the non-measurable; and further that the ultimate truth is enshrined in the latter and not in the former. This is no way implies that material and measurable things should be ignored or despised in principle, but simply that they should be seen for what they are, namely, signs or symbols of a reality immeasurably greater, more comprehensive and more enduring than they are, even in their totality. Here, as always, it is a case of preserving a right balance, and this can only be done by keeping the essential principles always in view, and interpreting the facts of observation accordingly. The main principle here in view is the metaphysical superiority or transcendence of the intangible and non-measurable over the tangible and measurable, that is to say, of quality over quantity. Without quantity the universe as we know it could have no existence, but the qualities would remain as unmanifested potentialities; such a situation is conceivable. Without quality, if anything could then be said to exist, it would have no intelligibility; it would have the completely abstract character of pure number, to which, as René Guénon has shown, the conception of quantity is in the last analysis reducible; such a situation is not, strictly speaking, conceivable, since one cannot form a conception of unrelieved indistinction, pure chaos. For similar reasons it is not realizable, nevertheless it is the situation towards which the world is moving, though it can never attain to it fully.

It is therefore not really surprising that an inversion of the priorities implied in this principle has culminated, quite logically, in a sort of nihilism, in the philosophy of "unyielding despair" which Bertrand Russell announced specifically, and others of the same persuasion by implication, as the only rational basis for the ordering of human life. If the priorities are kept in the right order, the beauty of flowers, seen as the expression of a principle and not as an accident, can teach us directly, intellectually, and without recourse to sentiment of any kind, that this philosophy of despair is rubbish. But can one thus metaphorically consign to the waste-paper basket the life's work of so many able and erudite men, highly trained in logic and in exposition, and deeply convinced that they are struggling to save mankind from self-destruction? What have they done to deserve such treatment? Well, what they have done is to consign to the waste-paper basket, metaphorically or otherwise, the whole of the "perennial philosophy" that is enshrined in the sacred Scriptures of the world, all the exposition and exemplification of that philosophy given by the saints and sages whom the world has revered from time immemorial, all religion, all tradition, in short, all that has hitherto given meaning to human life. And, one must add, all that can still give meaning to it, and not a spurious meaning, as they would have it, but the only meaning it has. If they are right, they themselves must be the avatars and the prophets of a new age of realism, destined to

replace millennia of delusion; but if they are wrong, the word "rubbish" applied to their work is too gentle. It is not their erudition that is in question, nor their logical consistency, nor yet their sincerity (for "sincerity" in its current sense makes no distinction between error and truth); it is the fundamental assumptions on which the logical structure of their philosophy is built. In the case of the two philosophies here contrasted, their respective starting-points are diametrically opposed, so that, even when there is a superficial resemblance in method or in development, there is still in reality no common measure between them. The one seeks to derive principles from phenomena, the other seeks to see phenomena in the light of their metaphysical principles. The first attempts an impossible task and consequently ends up in a sort of chaos or nihilism; the second attempts a task of supreme difficulty and one that can never be fully accomplished, least of all by the unaided efforts of man, but it is the task that justifies all other tasks.

Somebody may say: "Are you not doing exactly what you criticize, and trying to arrive at a principle by studying a phenomenon, for surely beauty is a phenomenon, since it is observable." Any such question misses the point that beauty as such is not a phenomenon and is not observable; what is observable is the material or psychic entity through which beauty is manifested in some degree and in some mode. The endless variety of its modes, in each of which it can achieve a sort of perfection that reflects its universality, bears witness to that very universality, to the fact that beauty is in its essence a principle and not an accident, independently of whether it be manifested in a flower or in a star or in a human soul.

Admittedly, to say that beauty is a principle or, for instance, an archetypal possibility of the highest metaphysical importance, adds nothing to the direct and incalculable impact of our experience of it. That experience can to a greater or less extent carry us "out of ourselves" by giving us a glimpse of something greater than ourselves, though its vehicle be only a humble flower. To the extent that it does so, it is an experience of the "super-natural," whether we recognize it as such or not; and it is necessarily either something like that, or it is in the last analysis but a perishable illusion devoid of ultimate significance. If it is devoid of ultimate significance, then so is everything else, ourselves included: a rejection of the super-natural logically and inevitably leads to something like a philosophy of despair. One could wish that those whose religion implies an acceptance of the super-natural would apply the same kind of logic to the development of their certitude as its rejecters apply to theirs, instead of always trying to justify it in terms of morality or of contingent advantage, which it is in the nature of the case impossible to do conclusively. The certitudes or basic assumptions that provide the starting-points of logic are necessarily themselves supra-logical, in the sense that, like existence itself or the beauty of a flower, they cannot themselves be objects of discursive proof.

There are a few people to whom flowers in general make little appeal, and there are many others whose floral likes and dislikes are at variance; the same is of course true of the perception of beauty in its many other forms. These commonplace facts may seem to support the idea that the whole issue turns on the vagaries of individual taste. But if beauty is what it has been said to be in the preceding paragraphs, its universality and transcendence imply that there must be some real or quasi-absolute criterion whereby taste can in principle be judged; the distinction between good and bad taste cannot be wholly arbitrary, nor a matter of fashion or period alone, nor even of the application of any purely human standards of

judgment. Such distinctions of taste as arise entirely from individual or collective peculiarities are indeed of a very limited and fugitive importance; other distinctions can however reveal differences of approach that are more profound, because they are connected with the didactic or symbolical aspects of their objects. Distinctions of taste in the floral domain are by no means always of the first kind alone; they may indeed be more revealing than distinctions applied to human artifacts, being uncomplicated by local or national differences of style and technique.

In certain circumstances the symbolical aspect of a particular flower predominates, but that occurs only when it is used as part of some formal and established religious or traditional symbolism. One could instance the rose in the center of the cross, where the five-petalled flower symbolizes the "quintessence," the unmanifested *quinta essentia* which is central to the four elements and is their principle; the lotus as the throne of the Buddha, horizontal but with upturned petals, and lying on the face of the waters; or the *fleur-de-lys*, which we now know as iris, and the association of its triple form with the Trinity. In such cases the symbolism associated with each flower could be called a specialized symbolism, to which the beauty of the flower is incidental. Here however, we are chiefly concerned with the general symbolism of flowers in its less specialized manifestations, and with its relation to what would usually be regarded purely as questions of individual or collective taste.

One aspect of the general symbolism of flowers which is often overlooked is the following: as everybody knows, the function of flowers is exclusively concerned with the sexual reproduction of plants. In general those parts of a flower which we most admire, such as the petals, are secondary sexual characters, closely associated with the minute primary characters. The whole assembly is paraded and flaunted with joyful unconcern above the more mundane structural and nutritive organs, and it constitutes what is usually for us the most attractive feature of the plant. In this way flowers exemplify more completely and perfectly than any other living organisms the primordial innocence, beauty and unselfconsciousness of the sexual function. As a symbol and as something like a perpetual renewal of the primordial Act of creation, that function is essentially sacred; but it can be profaned and prostituted by fallen man, who has lost his innocence and unselfconsciousness and can by no means recover them. The traditional restrictions and taboos which surround it in all human societies take account of these facts. To many people, especially in these days, those restrictions seem harsh and futile, or even psychologically unsound, but they are adapted not only to the present needs of fallen man, but also and above all to the safeguarding of the fate of his soul. The latter consideration plays almost no part in contemporary discussions of what has become a burning question, but it is by far the most important, outweighing all considerations of present ease. A conscious conformity to God's laws is required of us, in exchange for our gift of freewill. The beauty of a perfect but unconscious conformity is demonstrated in flowers here and now, as a perishable symbol of that which awaits in eternity those whose conformity in this life is fully conscious.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

There is a prayer which may be performed at all times and in all places, which by nothing can be interrupted but by sin and unfaithfulness... This incessant prayer now consists in an everlasting inclination of the heart to God, which inclination flows from Love. This love draws the presence of God into us: so that, as by the operation of divine grace the love to God is generated in us, so is also the presence of grace increased by this love, that such prayer is performed in us, without us or our cogitation. It is the same as with a person living in the air and drawing it in with his breath without thinking that by it he lives and breathes, because he does not reflect upon it. Wherefore this way is called a Mystical Way—that is, a secret and incomprehensible way. In one word, the prayer of the heart may be performed at all times, though the heart cannot think or speak at all times.

Johannes Kelpius.