Flowers (Part 2)

by

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Each manifestation of floral beauty is in some degree unique and incomparable. A wild rose, a Madonna lily, the Pasque flower, the common primrose, most crocus species, fritillaries, lily-of-thevalley, a wild cherry or apple (the latter in its true wild form is rare), Grass of Parnassus . . . But why continue? for the list might never end; but it can at least be restricted by considering only flowers that grow wild or can be cultivated out of doors in Britain. Each of the flowers named is like nothing else, and it is no use attempting to compare one with another. The writer is well aware that his own individual preferences have played a large part in the choice of those mentioned, but those preferences do not signify. Some readers may wish to delete, and some to add, but that also does not signify, provided that any plant named manifests a beauty all its own, beyond compare, or, as we so significantly say, "out of this world." There are also many less-conspicuous flowers that would qualify for inclusion if they were looked at carefully enough, not least the grasses and sedges, in which beauty of form is emphasized by a relative uniformity of color. And again there are many others which are indispensable as foils or backgrounds to set off the beauty of their brighter fellows, such as the Umbelliferae, the clovers, the bedstraws and so on. The picture is one of an endless variety of degrees and kinds of perfection, some really incomparable—that is to say, limited only by the fact that they exclude other perfections—and others of lower degree and limited in other ways. It is not wrong to use the word "perfection" in this way, although, according to the strict meaning of the word, it is an absolute and as such cannot be limited. But we are speaking of the world, and that is exactly what the world is, perfection manifested in imperfection, the absolute in the relative, the infinite in the finite; every part of the world mirrors the whole. The paradoxical or mysterious or miraculous character of the world is reflected in the gaiety, the subtlety and the extravagance of its floral adornment, at least as clearly as in any other feature.

A gardener or botanist may have noticed that all the flowers so far mentioned are species, that is to say that they occur as wild plants in this or in some other country, and are not among the innumerable hybrids or varieties that occur only in cultivation and are now conveniently described as "cultivars." These cultivars are the result of a conscious endeavor to enhance the pleasure given by flowers by selecting forms that are larger or brighter in color or more striking in form than the wild species from which they are derived; also by providing the gardener or the buyer of flowers with a much wider choice than he could obtain if he had to rely on species

alone. These cultivars are commonly referred to as “improved” varieties; perhaps the commonest and the oldest kind of “improvement” consists in a multiplication of the petals, resulting in what we call a “double” flower. Double flowers, and flowers showing unusual size or brilliance as well as other departures from the normal occur occasionally in nature, and the development of most cultivars has started by the selection of such “sports,” because their peculiarities can often be accentuated under the conditions of intensive cultivation. As is well known, it is this possibility of artificial selection, often resulting in great changes in the outward forms of plants, which provided Darwin with the basis of his theory of natural selection.

Whatever may be the explanation of the beauty of wild flowers, there can be no doubt that there is a conscious purpose behind the changes brought about by cultivation; it is of course the satisfaction of the desires of mankind. As those desires have never been so ambitious as they are today, nor the means of satisfying them so easy to come by, so it is with flowers. The contemporary desire for novelty, for sensationalism, for quantity (which includes size as well as number) is catered for by new methods of inducing variations and of speedy propagation. The question then is to what extent and in what sense the results of the work of flower breeders past and present can properly be designated “improvement”; or in other words, whether they are in general expressions of good taste. That work has produced many long-established favorites, the double roses and pinks, the enlarged lily-of-the-valley, the endless variety of pansies, primroses and auriculas, the double peonies, the chrysanthemums and dahlias, fuchsias and geraniums, tulips, irises and so on, some of which are seen in almost every garden, and no wonder, because they have endless brilliance and charm. They are however in danger of being superseded by more recent introductions, the bewildering multiplicity of which is presented to us in innumerable catalogues, wherein the resources of language are strained to the utmost to describe their striking colors, gigantic size and sensational effect. Without attempting to deny that some of these sensational novelties are beautiful, occasionally very beautiful, it may yet be permissible to suggest that in too many cases much more has been lost than has been gained. The new floribunda roses do not belie their name, but most of them are shapeless and often unbelievably crude in color; the total effect of a bed of modern roses is indeed startling, but it is little else; the latest gladioli have the same faults; the new daffodils look like artificial flowers which in a sense they are; cyclamens, among the most subtly elegant of flowers, have become enormous, distorted and even frilled, pansies have become huge and floppy, polyanthus primrose gigantic, sometimes frilled and even pink in color, losing all their characteristic decisive neatness; the regal pelargoniums had comparable qualities but are suffering exactly the same fate. One has sometimes got to look at the leaves to see whether a flower is a pelargonium or a petunia or a hibiscus or what. Delphiniums, larkspurs, clarkias, godetias have become like solid columns of colored crinkly paper, losing all their pristine elegance of form and marking. In short the general tendency is all towards the substitution of ostentation for elegance, crudity for subtlety, blatancy for beauty, quantity for quality. People do not seem to want to look at a flower, they want to be

hit in the eye by it. The frequent sacrifice of scent to gaudiness is often lamented, but it seems equally often to be accepted as inevitable.

The views just expressed about what is happening to garden flowers are fairly widespread although those who hold them are in a minority. The "improved" varieties are on the whole much the most popular, and that is what makes it worthwhile for the nurseryman to produce them. The word "vulgar" simply means "popular," and vulgar in a derogatory sense is precisely what the taste of the majority inevitably is and always will be. We saw earlier that, beauty being what it is, the criteria of taste can never be wholly arbitrary, despite the fact that individual and collective peculiarities and fashions play a very large part in establishing them in any particular case. Those criteria cannot be defined in terms of human reactions and nothing else, the ultimate criteria can only be sought in the field of symbolism, for it is through their symbolism alone that the phenomena of this world bring us into contact with the absolute. Now it can be asserted that the symbolism of the natural is always more direct than that of the artificial, although this does not necessarily imply that the artificial—that is to say, whatever is man-made in whole or in part—must always in all circumstances be rejected in favor of the natural, for man was not given his faculties and powers for nothing. The natural is nevertheless always nearer to its origin, and its origin is the Origin of all things; the work of man, or man's interference with the natural, especially when it is directed mainly to the satisfaction of his own desires and fancies, always tends towards forgetfulness of the Origin. This forgetfulness grows as man takes more and more pride in his own supposed originality or "creativity," although in fact no man ever created anything; the most any man can do is to play about with potentialities already present in his material, and rearrange them for his advantage or amusement. However, for so long as man does not lose sight of the origin of his material, nor of the fact that its origin is also his own—and this implies among other things that he does not lose his humility—his work may be legitimate and he may not overstep the bounds of good taste. Up to a point, then, the deliberate rearrangement, encouragement or suppression of potentialities present in living things—flowering plants for example—can lead to a certain enrichment at not too heavy a cost, although the enrichment always tends to be quantitative and the loss to be qualitative. Inevitably there comes a point at which the balance tips, and thereafter erroneous tendencies reinforce one another, so that not only do losses outweigh gains, but even those gains themselves prove unsatisfying, and must constantly be replaced by others even more costly in terms of qualitative excellence. All this is aggravated by the intrusion of commercialism, with its large-scale mechanized operations, standardization and advertising. In the end it becomes virtually the dictator of taste.

That being so, one can at least see why the improved varieties produced in the earlier years of plant breeding should generally be qualitatively superior to later productions. The old-fashioned roses, the cottage pinks and carnations, the double stocks, and many other old favorites, although very artificial in that they are very "double," are nevertheless still a little "out of this world," and so are the auriculas, pansies and violas; their beauty is subtle and mysterious even when they are very "showy." The same could be said of many of the Japanese ornamental

cherries, maples and peonies. Nevertheless, the enrichment represented by these more or less ancient cultivars, as well as by many of the less vulgar of their successors, is nearly always in the realm of the quantitative and sensual; the corresponding impoverishment is always in the realm of the qualitative and symbolical. And so one can see how once again the prevailing tendencies of the day are reflected in the floral domain, this time in the department of floriculture. If they are reflected less intensely there than they are in some other sectors of the field of visual aesthetics—notably in painting and sculpture—it is because the material used is the living plant, which must at least remain alive, and while it does so it can never lose all its natural characteristics.

Added to the ever-growing array of new cultivars available to gardeners, is a vast number of alien species, introduced into this country from all over the world in the past hundred years or so. A few of them have established themselves firmly in our gardens, as firmly as older introductions such as tulips, lilacs, peonies and roses, and no less worthily. We should be poorer without *Viburnum fragrans*, the regal lily, the blue-poppy, and some of the new Rhododendrons, to mention only a few of those most widely cultivated. In all, hundreds, even thousands, of exotic species are cultivated by enthusiasts and admired by many more. The hybridizers are of course hard at work "improving" them, especially the lilies. It has been said that a greater variety of plants can be grown in the British Isles than in any comparable area in the world, and this is probably not far wrong. Here indeed is a tremendous enrichment, horticulturally speaking; it may indeed represent something like an *embarras de richesses*: but if so, it is surely of a fairly harmless kind. But it is confined to the relatively restricted and artificial domain of horticulture, and as such it is a poor compensation for another result of the artificiality of modern life, the depletion of our wild flowers.

The demand for land for residential, industrial and recreational uses, chemical methods of weed-control on farms and elsewhere, and the invasion of the countryside by a motorized proletariat, pathetically longing for virgin nature but incompatible with its continued existence, these and other factors are resulting in an appallingly rapid depletion of wild flowers both in quantity and in variety. The creation of "nature reserves," desirable though it be, like many other attempts to preserve a precious heritage, cannot restore that heritage, but can only preserve it as a museum specimen, no longer alive, though better than nothing.

Not only the longing for virgin nature, but also the cult of flowers so prevalent today, are above all signs of an unconscious reaction against the ugliness associated with almost all the products of an industrialized society; and that ugliness is itself a sign, a sign of the hatefulness of all that brings it about. If a modern town were in conformity with the real needs and destiny of its inhabitants, they would love it and seek it, instead of getting out of it into the country or to the seaside at every available opportunity, often at the cost of great and prolonged discomfort and inconvenience. But they cannot help bringing the town out with them; the car, the radio, the newspapers, the cartons; and in doing so they gradually destroy the very thing they are seeking.

That thing is in the last analysis, did they but know it, not so much natural beauty as communion with God. It is that, too, that the lover of flowers is really seeking, and if he knew it, he would not be so keen as he is on their supposed "improvement"; he would be more ready to accept and to marvel, and perhaps to understand.

It is mainly field botanists and Nature Conservation societies who are aware of and lament the elimination, except in a few carefully guarded sites, of many of our rarer plants, such as the Pasque flower, the fritillary and numerous orchids. Obvious to all is the reduction in buttercups, ox-eye daisies, harebell, primrose, cowslip, meadow saxifrage, wild daffodil, in short, of almost everything that formerly made our meadows flowery. There is also the more equivocal case of the weeds of arable land. Charlock may be dismissed as both vicious and ugly, but the poppy, the corn-cockle, the corn marigold, the bindweed and the cornflower have been deservedly admired, though harmful to the crops with which they compete. Under the older farming methods they could usually be kept more or less in check but they could not be eliminated; modern methods are more comprehensive. These weeds, together with their no less numerous and troublesome but less visually attractive companions in the field, are not defeated yet; but if modern chemical methods are pursued and developed for a few more decades they may well be virtually eliminated. Crops could then be grown more cheaply, but in terms of financial cost alone.

The most recent development in the same direction consists in the invention of plastic flowers. By the use of modern techniques the most conspicuous features of the forms and colors of natural or cultivated flowers can be imitated very closely; this applies particularly to lilies. If the broad decorative effect of floral arrangements were the sole criterion of the value of flowers, it would be difficult to find any plausible objection to the use of plastic flowers in appropriate circumstances. They last for ever, they need no messy water to keep them going, they are washable and can be packed away when not in use, and they eliminate all the recurrent trouble and expense associated with real flowers. The artificial flowers of the past were usually recognizable as such and did not pretend to be anything else; they were indeed often products of a real art; one could instance the charming "flowers" made out of shells in the Far East, which are the products of a gentle and unassuming form of decorative art that charms without deceiving. It is precisely their deceptiveness that condemns plastic flowers. They represent an attempt at a complete and conclusive replacement of the works of God by the works of man, a more and more complete obscuring of the reality by the appearance, a further substitution of the spurious but plausible for the genuine and guileless, death masquerading more and a corpse. Their use in churches in substitution for real flowers is nothing less than a desecration; their use elsewhere is a manifestation of bad taste pure and simple, and is correspondingly significant.

In conspicuous contrast to their durability is the evanescence of real flowers. Among the innumerable types of beauty in this world, that of flowers is both the most widespread and the most untarnished, and at the same time one of the least durable. As we have seen, their ephemerality is that of the material forms through which their beauty is manifested, and does not

appertain to beauty as such; those forms are however continually and rhythmically renewed. This year's dog-rose is not the same as last year's, but its beauty is the same; the quality is eternal, only its manifestation in a material form is ephemeral. The theme of the perishability of all forms and of their rhythmical renewal is frequent in the sacred scriptures of the world. Existence is joined to eternity not only through the qualities manifested in it, but also through its rhythms, which as it were compensate the irreversible and devouring character of time. We can sense this directly when the repeated and identical vibrations of a string produce a single musical note; by extension we can perhaps learn to hear something of the "music of the spheres," wherein the rhythms of the whole creation are unified in one great song of praise.

Reginald Farrer, a great gardener who introduced many plants from the Far East, wrote in *The Rainbow Bridge* (p. 225) as follows:

> And if, amid the cataclysms of anguish that clamor round us everywhere nowadays (1918), you declare that all this babble about beauty and flowers is a vain impertinence, then I must tell you that you err, and that your perspectives are false. Mortal dooms and dynasties are brief things, but beauty is indestructible and eternal, if its tabernacle be only a petal that is shed tomorrow. Wars and agonies are shadows only cast across the path of man: each successive one seems the end of all things, but man perpetually emerges and goes forward, lured always and cheered and inspired by the immortal beauty-thought that finds form in all the hopes and enjoyments of his life. *Inter arma silent flores*[1] is no truth; on the contrary, amid the crash of doom our sanity and survival more than ever depend on the strength with which we can listen to the still small voice that towers above the cannons, and cling to the little quiet things of life, the things that come and go and yet are always there, the inextinguishable lamps of God amid the disaster that man has made of his life.

The evanescence of flowers is not a matter for regret: it is an ever-present reminder of what we are, their recurrence is at the same time a guarantee of the immutability of the qualities that so delight us in them. Plastic flowers are therefore doubly condemned, and that by the very characteristics most commonly cited in their favor, namely, the fact that their resemblance to real flowers is so close, and the fact that they do not fade.

Ought we then not to enjoy flowers for the sake of the simple, direct and unselfconscious pleasure they afford, but rather on the contrary always be trying to philosophize about them or learn something from them by reflecting on their symbolism? By no means, because the reality that can be discerned through the symbolism of flowers is itself something that can only be apprehended directly, just as their beauty is apprehended; it cannot be attained by the analytical

[1] Editor's Note: This can be translated as, "In time of war, flowers are silent."

or imaginative powers of the mind alone, and it cannot be contained by any formula. An understanding of symbolism and reflection thereon is very far from being useless, but it cannot by itself either take the place of or bring about the direct apprehension of reality that is prefigured in our natural and unaffected delight in flowers.

One day the disciples of the Buddha were assembled to hear him preach a sermon. But he said not a word; instead, he stooped down and plucked a flower and held it up for them to see. Of all that assembly, only one showed by his smile that he understood.

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Editorial Note

This article on Flowers is taken from the late Lord Northbourne's book *Looking Back on Progress* (Published by Perennial Books) and is included as a tribute to him and his work.

(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.