ELAINE SCARRY

Imagining Flowers: Perceptual Mimesis (Particularly Delphinium)

I SPOKE IN AN EARLIER ESSAY about the problem of vivacity—about the ghostly enfeeblement of images under the ordinary exercise of daydreaming and, in contrast, the mysterious (or difficult to account for) vividness of mental images when we are under the instruction of the verbal arts—and I ended with lines by John Ashbery:

> Something
> Ought to be written about how this affects
> You when you write poetry:
> The extreme austerity of an almost empty mind
> Colliding with the lush, Rousseau-like foliage of its desire to
> communicate

Ashbery returns often to this subject and when he does, the image that he again and again uses to express the image-making power of the mind under poetry's sway is—as in the lush foliage of the lines above—that of the flower: "Now,/ About what to put in your poem-painting," he writes, "Flowers are always nice, particularly delphinium."[1]

In his prose poem "Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are," Ashbery speaks about the invention of writing, "the cross-hatching technique which allowed our ancestors to exchange certain genetic traits for others," and he continues:

> Probably they meant for us to enjoy the things they enjoyed, like late summer evenings, and hoped that we'd find others and thank them for providing us with the wherewithal to find and enjoy them. Singing the way they did, in the old time, we can sometimes see through the tissues and tracings the genetic process has laid down between us and them. The tendrils can suggest a hand, or a specific color—the yellow of the tulip, for instance—will flash for a moment in such a way that after it has been withdrawn we can be sure that there was no imagining, no auto-suggestion here, but at the same time it becomes as useless as all subtracted memories. It has brought certainty without heat or light. Yet still in the old time, in the faraway summer evenings, they must have had a word for this, or known that we would someday need one, and wished to help.[2]

In its very vivacity, in the conviction it at once compels, the sudden yellow flash of the tulip seems to have come neither by "imagining" nor by "auto-suggestion" but

by perception. Ashbery's turn to its yellow, or to the particularity of the delphinium blossom, or to the lush, leafy foliage of the mind's desire to communicate is striking, yet also widely shared. Both José Ortega y Gasset and Walter Benjamin have called attention to "the vegetative life" of Marcel Proust. And Seamus Heaney repeatedly pictures poetic consciousness entangled with sweet pea, cow parsley, and meadow grass. Verbal creation, he writes, is an archaeological dig, "a dig for finds that end up being plants."[3]

I have elsewhere argued that the imagination consists exclusively of its objects, that it is only knowable through its object, that it is remarkable among intentional states for not being easily separable into the double structure of state and object. Fear, for example, though certainly describable in terms of such objects as earthquakes and examinations, is also recognizable in terms of the intentional state, the felt experience, with its familiar bodily and psychological attributes. The same is true of other states such as joy and surprise, which are recognizable in terms of both their objects and the felt experience. In contrast, imagining is only its objects.[4] There exists almost no account of the felt experience of image-making. This does not mean that we lack accounts of the action of imagining; we have a number. But in almost every case, the action is wholly derived from whatever object happens to be put forth as its representative. If Pegasus is the example, then the discussion will be centrally about the capacity of the imagination to take what is given in the natural world—such as horses and wings—and rearrange them into a new combination. If the representative object is the face of an absent friend—like Jean-Paul Sartre's Annie and Pierre—then the discussion will be centrally about the presence of imagining in everyday acts of perception (as it is for someone like Mary Warnock). If the representative object is Yaweh—an object that explicitly prohibits any specification of attributes—then the discussion will be about the near impossibility of imagining without imagining something, a project made barely possible by the ability of "objectlessness" to itself be taken as an object. I want in this essay to contemplate the implicit account of the action of imagining that comes before us when the representative object is a flower; or perhaps more accurately I should say, I want to contemplate the implicit account of the action of imagining that comes before us in the yellow flash of the tulip or the particularity of the delphinium. For, unlike the images of Pegasus and Yaweh, the flower has the feature of forever shattering into scores of specified surfaces.

It is not irrelevant to this enterprise to notice that a blossom lends itself to being imagined, to being mentally captured in nearly the same degree of extraordinary vivacity it has in the perceptual world. If one takes the four representative objects a moment ago introduced—Pegasus, Yaweh, the faces of Annie and Pierre, and the flower—it is clear that the first two illustrate the counterfactual sweep of the imagination and the second two, what can usefully be called its counterfictional impulse.[5] Pegasus and Yaweh express the imagination's originary power, the power to bring new things into the world, though they do so to varying de-

grees: Pegasus conforms to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's fancy or secondary imagination, its capacity to reassemble in an unprecedented form elements that in isolation are part of the natural given; Yaweh conforms to Coleridge's primary imagination, expressing the capacity to create that which is in its entirety without precedent. The second two objects in contrast—the faces of absent friends, on the one hand, and the yellow tulip and blue delphinium on the other—both express the counterfictional, the aspiration of imagining to bring about a mimesis of perceiving. Rather than wishing to turn away from the world and create a new one, or to supplement the existing world with features it does not yet have, all the imagination's longing is instead directed toward being able to bring about things (or a certain set of things such as vivacity and givenness) sensorily present in perception. But the daydreamed face expresses the lapse of the imagination from the perceptual ideal it has taken as its standard, whereas the daydreamed blossom, as I will try to suggest, expresses the capacity of the imagination to perform its mimesis so successfully that one cannot be sure an act of perception has not actually taken place: "The yellow of the tulip . . . will flash for a moment in such a way that after it has been withdrawn we can be sure that there was no imagining, no auto-suggestion here."

Two questions are central. Why do flowers so often come to be taken as the representative object of imagining? It may be because, of all objects in the world, they are most beautiful.[6] Should anyone wish to press this explanation, I will be eager to assent and happy to forgo the speculative descriptions that follow. But it has been noticed—Immanuel Kant, for example, noticed it—that the world is covered with beauty. So the question is, why, among all these beautiful things, do flowers so often push themselves forward as our primary candidates.

The second question looks at the specific revelations about the counterfactual and counterfictional that the particular image might expose. The content of a given image calls attention to the structural attributes of the imagination. We might notice, for example, that Pegasus expresses not only the mind's ability to reassemble already existing parts into new wholes but also its action of producing weightless images. One is tempted to say that due to the thinness or weightlessness of mental images, Pegasus could lift off the ground even if he did not have wings. (But perhaps he needs them to move forward: without wings, he could float; only with wings can he fly.) Visible also in Pegasus, therefore, is the imagination's aspiration to lift us above the material world, to disencumber us of given restraints. The flower, no doubt, makes visible the opposite movement of the imagination, its willful re-encumbering of itself, its anchoring of itself in the ground—its aspiration, in other words, to rival material reality in its vivacity. What else is at stake, or what is more literally at stake, is the second question to be addressed.

Presumably flowers come forward because they are imaginable: faces express the labor of perceptual mimesis; flowers seem to express its ease. Probably everyone has, at least once in this lifetime, heard someone echoing Marcel's lament in

Remembrance of Things Past of not being able to picture a certain face with a vivacity commensurate with one's affection for the person. But has any one ever encountered someone complaining that though she loves columbine above all other flowers, or meadow rue best in the world, she just cannot get an image of it clearly in mind? In fact, people seem to spend long languorous conversations describing to others the flower they that morning most love, as well as the precise shades of pinks among the astilbes, which among the many-flowers-promised-to-be-blue are actually blue or instead purple or lavender, which shape of the columbine they like best, all this on the telephone, or by letter, that is, all occurring without the actual material objects in view. (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his botanical letters, sometimes refused to give the name of the flower he was that day describing, insisting that he could plant so precise a picture in his correspondent's mind that she would at once recognize it when she later came upon it in the meadow or garden.)[7] Flowers lend themselves to long, highly charged, and highly judgmental aesthetic conversations. But why is this? What accounts for the picturability of columbine or for the ease of imagining meadow rue?

The Space of Imagined Blossoms

Flowers, unlike the faces of human beings, appear to be the perfect size for imagining. An imaginary object does occupy an identifiable location, and that location is in part determined by the size of its perceptual counterpart in the material world. For example, if the picture is occurring outside the boundary of the body, it is usually somewhere in the field that is encompassed by vision. If the object is the size of the flower it will probably appear immediately in the small bowl of space in front of one's eyes: this may be in part because in the perceptual world flowers are continually being lifted up off the ground into the space before our faces by vases, window boxes, and the paintings of vases and window boxes by Matisse, Manet, Renoir, van Gogh. But this phenomenon also occurs because flowers fit into that space in the way that a horse, with or without wings, clearly does not. If the horse were placed there, one would only see a small patch of him. In order to see a great deal of him, he would have to be placed, let's say, at least ten feet away. The only way he could be placed immediately in front of our eyes would be through radical miniaturization. The same is true if the picture has been placed inside the boundary of the body. When we think of images somewhere on the inside of the body, we habitually think of them as residing inside the head. In fact, however, it turns out the be remarkably easy to carry out one's imagining in other parts of the body: while, for example, one may picture Pegasus in one's forehead, one can imagine him instead in one's forearm, or instead in one's forefinger.[8] This is of course true even if one is picturing a changing image such as a man sitting by a window with apple-tree shadows playing across his face as he

performs weight experiments with a leaf and books: all this can take place with almost equal ease in the interiors of forehead, forearm, forefinger. But as can be quickly apprehended, both Pegasus and the man in the chair change their size depending on the physical location in which one's imagining of them takes place. In the forefinger, for example, they become exceedingly small: Pegasus can barely fly, and the leaf in the man's experiments, and the shadows across his face are almost too small to see. In fact the whole point of that experiment with apple-tree shadows is lost since its purpose was to watch the gradual materialization of his face (its mobility and solidity) and, here in the forefinger, one can barely make out even the outline of his head. An image almost always contracts or expands to fill the physical space specified. It is useful to acknowledge this, because if we now leave aside forefinger and forearm and return exclusively to the habitual space of interior imagining—the forehead—it inescapably appears that, unlike men sitting in chairs or Pegasus or most other things (all of which suffer the radical miniaturization they underwent when placed in the exterior space close to the face), unlike all these other things, the yellow tulip of John Ashbery or Geoffrey Chaucer's daisy or William Wordsworth's celandine or William Blake's lily or Rainer Maria Rilke's opium poppy or most other blossoms fit precisely into this interior space without any alteration in the size they have in the external world.

When a poet describes a flower, even (I think) when a poet merely names a flower, it is always being offered up as something that after a brief stop in front of the face can immediately pass through the resisting bone and lodge itself and light up the inside of the brain. In Rilke's "The Bowl of Roses," a poem that will be returned to several times, he places the roses directly in front of us:

> before you stands the full bowl of roses,
> which is unforgettable and filled
> with that utmost of being and bending

As he continues to describe the intricacies of the blossoms themselves, they seem to have already passed into the interior of our imagining, that at once accommodates their size and contours:

> Soundless living, endless opening out,
> space being used without space being taken
> from that space adjacent things diminish,
> existence almost uncontoured, like ground left blank
> and pure within-ness, much so strangely soft
> and self-illuminating—out to the edge:
> is there anything we know like this?[9]

The most unexpected thing about the flower as the representative object of perceptual mimesis is that—as I will try to show at a much later point—it is precisely

here that one begins to get the very thing I started this essay by saying we never get in accounts of the imagination, namely the felt experience of image-making. "Is there anything we know like this?" Surely Rilke means us to be able to say "yes" at this moment, to undergo an act of recognition—to understand where we have seen this before and where we are seeing it now, to understand what it is we see in "the ground left blank," "the pure within-ness," the "much so strangely soft and self-illuminating." It is as though the soft, self-illuminating petals are the tissue of the mental images themselves—not the thing pictured, but the surfaces on which the images will get made. The poet gives us the easily imaginable flower (the object that we can fairly successfully imagine even in daydreaming) and does so in order to carry onto that surface other, much less easily imaginable images. In the poem "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Walt Whitman for fifteen stanzas moves us hypnotically back and forth from the night-lit lilacs (every heart-shaped leaf "a miracle") to the dropping star in the night sky (lilac, leaf, and star) and only in the sixteenth stanza does there suddenly appear the face of the person mourned, "O comrade lustrous with silver face in the night."[10] The night-lit blossom has acted as the template on which the image of the face gets made. It is the work table on which the less easily imagined becomes imaginable. The petal is, in effect, the substance, the "mental retina" on which the others are formed.[11] The same is true of the lines from Ashbery. The yellow flash of the tulip makes not only itself visible; it is the surface on which that entire summer evening passage is carried into the mind, for when we look again we see that it comes to us as though written on a flower or a leaf: "singing the way they did, in the old time, we can sometimes see through the tissues and tracing. . . . The tendrils can suggest a hand." Here, as everywhere in Blake, it is as though the vegetative tissues, tracings, and tendrils are the illuminated manuscript on which the picture of the writing gets carried.[12]

Sympathetic Shape, Faultless Curvature

The kind of claim I am making about a literal match between the size of the physical body and the size of its favored object may seem overly literalized. (In fact, I can already hear the wry formulations of this that will return to me.) But the claim is borne out by experiments in cognitive psychology that show that in image-making "people spontaneously tend to image smaller objects as if they were closer."[13] When people in one experiment were asked to imagine animals of ten different sizes, the larger ones were consistently placed farther away than the smaller ones, though it turned out that small animals could not be seen in detail by the experimental imaginers because small animals (unlike flowers) do not often come close enough that we can really learn their features. An imagined elephant

is placed farther away from the imaginer's face than an imagined rabbit, just as in visual perception an actual elephant must be placed farther away from us so that we can see its entire surface.[14]

In the realm of perception—as opposed to that of daydreaming and imagining-under-authorial-instruction—it would be unthinkable *not* to take centrally into account the fit between perceiver and perceived. For example, most objects are too small or too large to be seen, and there is nothing surprising about the requirement that something be within the perceivable scale in order to be apprehended, just as there is nothing surprising about the very precise match between the size of certain sounds we hear with great acuity, such as a baby's cry, and the size of the mechanisms of the inner ear. In fact, in the realm of perception, claims about a match between the physical contours of the body and of favored objects even extend to the felt pleasures of perceiving. Joseph Addison, for example, speaks in his *Spectator* papers of the special love we have for "the concave and the convex" because those shapes are sympathetic with the shape of the eye itself: "Look upon the outside of a dome, your eye half surrounds it; look up into the inside, and, at one glance, you have all the prospect of it; the entire concavity falls into your eye at once." Addison elaborates this: "There are, indeed, figures of bodies, where the eye may take in two-thirds of the surface; but, as in such bodies, the sight must split upon several angles, it does not take in one uniform idea, but several ideas of the same kind." He concludes: "For this reason, the fancy is infinitely more struck with the view of the open air and skies, that passes through an arch, than what comes through a square, or any other figure."[15]

Addison's account of the sympathy between the physical curve of our eyes and the "entire concavity [that therefore] falls into your eyes at once" has not been chosen at random, since many blossoms have this very shape, and, like size, shape surely contributes to the special imaginability of flowers, the phenomenon I am trying to understand at this moment. In one of Virginia Woolf's short stories, the narrator cries out in exasperation over "the rapidity of life, the perceptual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard" but then suddenly moves to a paradisal image: "But after life. The slow pulling down of the thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower, as it turns over, deluges one with purple and red light."[16] The shape pours in on one's imagining mind as in one's perceiving, and the imagination, as though absorbing the curvature of the eye into its own recesses, seems to yearn for it and find it nowhere so often as in flowers. John Ruskin's small book *Queen of the Air* (the work that ignited Marcel Proust's intense infatuation with Ruskin)[17] devotes one-third of its pages to the description of individual blossoms, blossom by blossom, noting the concave shapes (the "cups" and "vases," the "tubes" and "phials") of campanula, foxglove, the asphodels and Draconidae; and writing of the great group of Drosidae: "The delicacy of the substance of their petals" enables "them to take forms of faultless elastic curvature, either in cups, as the crocus or expanding bells, as the true lily, or heath-like bells, as the hyacinth."[18]

Rousseau continually describes the "vases," "parasols," "pavilions" of individual blossoms, as in his three-page inquiry into the five petals of the sweet pea blossom.[19] The concave blossom also reappears in D. H. Lawrence's account of the rape of Persephone, pursued by the underworld in the flowers that suddenly emerge on the surface of the ground and seize our attention as they seize Persephone herself: "purple anemones / Caverns / Little hells of color, / caves of darkness."[20] The ungraspable expanse of the underworld can suddenly (as Addison promised) be taken-in in a single glance in the shape of the anemone. So too, and more happily, the shape reappears in Rilke's poem "Opium Poppy," whose blossom is "willing, open, and concave." The shape of self-delight is audible in the last hyphenated word of the poem, "poppy-cup."[21]

In "On Vivacity" I wrote about how the attributes of the imagined object in daydreaming are discontinuous with the imagined object elicited by the verbal arts. The daydreamed object has the Sartrean features of two-dimensionality, inertia, and thinness. The image elicited by the verbal arts, in contrast, has some of the vivacity, solidity, persistence and givenness of the perceptual world, attributes that can in part be accounted for by the instructional quality of writings, the explicit directions for how to construct the image that replace our own sense of volition with the sense of something there for the taking. The vivacity of objects imagined under authorial direction can also be attributed to a set of such specific phenomena as the mimesis of the material antecedents of images, the enlisting of the imagination's own expertise in generating certain odd attributes (such as gauziness), the sensory experiments carried out by fictional persons within the text, and the uneven distribution of these techniques (their capacious presence for persons the author directs us to imagine, their absence from the persons or places longed for by fictional persons within the text). To this list we can add the fact that in rare cases where an image, for whatever peculiar reasons, can in fact be vividly apprehended by the daydreaming mind, the verbal arts will of course enlist that image into a major part of their strategies; my work at the particular moment is simply to identify one such peculiar image, the easily daydreamed flower, and to specify what makes it exceptional, what makes it easy.

Locality Rule: Color and Compositional Surface

The imaginability of the flower can in part be attributed to its *size*, which lets it sit in the realm in front of our faces and migrate into the interior of what Aristotle called "our large moist brains." It can in part be attributed to the flower's cuplike *shape* breaking over the curve of our eyes, whether in actual acts of seeing or in mimetic seeing. A third feature is its intense *localization*. The experimental literature in cognitive psychology suggests that "there is only a limited

amount of energy or 'processing capacity' with which to construct images," with the result that a smaller image will also be a more "filled-in image."[22] We can ourselves test the accuracy of this insight. If one closes one's eyes and pictures, for example, a landscape that encompasses the imaginative equivalent of our visual field, it is very hard to fill in its entirety with concentrated colors and surfaces. If, in contrast, one images the face of a flower—a much smaller portion of the visual field with its sudden dropping off at the edge of the petals where no image production is required—the concentration of color and surface comes within reach.

We might call this the ratio of extension to intensity. The flower brings the work of imagining into the compass of our compositional powers. If this observation seems odd or unfamiliar, it is certainly familiar in the analogous work of painters. During the last months of his life in 1883, as well as in periods of illness and weakness during the two years before that, Manet painted a series of oils, mostly of sprigs of lilac in a water glass or vase, sometimes of roses and other flowers. If Manet was weak (and it is said that he was very weak) his weakness shows itself not in any diminution of the intensity of the paintings but only in their scale. The paintings are extremely small. The canvas of *Lilacs in a Water Glass*, for example, is approximately 10 inches by 8 inches; *Roses in a Champagne Glass* is approximately 12 inches by 9 inches; *Lilacs and Roses* is 12 inches by 9 inches. Further, the actual area of imagistic localization is much smaller than the canvas, for the lilacs (in some pictures, lavender; in others, white with light green; in one, deep navy blue) are the size of actual lilac sprigs (four- or five-inch ellipses), and at their edges the backgrounds fall away into uniform lavender-gray or black. Their small size may be compared to the scale of paintings such as Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass* (83 inches by 106 inches), to *Olympia* (51 inches by 74 inches), to *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (99 inches by 120 inches), as well as to the painting considered his "final great achievement" and completed a year before his death during a brief period of strength, *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (38 inches by 51 inches). In all of these, in contrast to the small pictures of lilacs and roses, it is not some localized object, but the entire surface that is filled in.[23] The last day of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's life, when he was very fatigued with pneumonia, he painted a small "study of anemones" that a maid in the household had brought in to him from the garden. Renoir's final words—"I think I'm beginning to understand something about it"—refer to those flowers.[24] (Some popular accounts incorrectly, but comprehensibly, claim that "flower" was the last sentence he spoke.) These examples underscore the obvious point that the labor of construction has a certain radius: in imagining, as in painting, the localization of intensely filled-in surfaces becomes possible with a smaller surface.

We can also find equivalents for what can be called the "locality rule" in the verbal arts. There is a moment in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, for example, when Thomas Hardy is instructing us in the construction of a certain scene where he

notes that the temperature behind every piece of furniture in the room is slightly different. Local for Hardy means not neighborhood, not house, not even room, but each pocket of air hovering around each chair or table. Nothing about the work of this detail is accounted for by explanations that say vivid writing piles on more and more details: on the contrary, the accumulation of detail leads only to what Edward Tufte, in his analysis of visual information in maps, timetables, and architectural drawings calls "visual noise" or "color junk." Further, what Hardy does at that moment is subtractive rather than additive. He takes the overall visual field, then gathers all the diffuse compositional labor we are at that moment engaged in distributing over its entire surface, and now folds it into one exquisitely narrow ribbon of specification that runs across the circumference of the room designating the variation of the single sensory dimension, temperature. If one were to take that narrow strip and calculate its total surface area, it would probably be about as big as a flower.

Here is another instance. It begins with a sentence Addison would appreciate: "[Norcombe Hill] was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil—an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion." The picture we are instructed to make is diffuse and, save for the dome outline, it has none of its surface filled in. But now again Hardy begins to harvest all the ambient pastel light and concentrates it on one small patch whose composition is within the magnitude of our power:

> The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its arched curve against the sky, like a mane. To-night these trees sheltered the southern slope from the keenest blasts, which smote the wood and floundered through it with a sound as of. . . .[25]

And here begins an extended description of the spinning of leaves and stormy wind, all of which has been explicitly marked off from the largest surface of the composition (the entire southern slope has been excised) and which therefore has a radius that permits the intensity of disturbance Hardy now assigns to it. The overactivity of description occurs in a space that then has a rapid falloff to zero; all the compositional energy we might devote to the full picture is instead drafted into the storm on the northern slope. In the same way, when one pictures (or even looks at) a flower, there is an intense localization of color with a sudden dropping off at the edges.

The high ratio of intensity to extension—what I'm calling the locality rule when it occurs as a feature of Hardy's prose—is already at work in the flower, even when it is only daydreamed and certainly when it is composed under authorial instruction. The concentration of a small patch of high coloration explains why variations in the surface of the flower are always attended to. Aristotle, for example, who sometimes seems to have written his essays in a garden, says in his

treatise on color that "the petals of the poppy are crimson at their ends, because the process of maturation takes place quickly there, but at their base they are black, because this color is already predominant at the end." He attributes the color shifts to varying ripening speeds within the flower, to the uneven rapidity of maturation; but what is crucial at the moment is not the accuracy or inaccuracy of his explanation but his ease in specifying the surface he wishes us to picture. While the variable color of the fruit can also be explained this way, "[It] is still more evident in the actual blossoms. . . . The best example of all is the iris; for its blossom shows a great variety of hues according to the different states of maturation in its different parts. . . . Therefore the extremities of blossoms always ripen most completely, whilst the parts near the base have much less colour."[26]

The specificity of the poppy and iris petals can be contrasted with various accounts of the nonspecificity of the daydreamed face. Sartre opens his description of Peter's face by noticing that it presents itself without any specificity of angle "like the silhouettes drawn by children; the face is seen in profile, but both eyes are nevertheless drawn in. . . . They are 'presentable' under an all-inclusive aspect." When we imagine a face, we "obtain these objects in their entirety."[27] If Sartre's observation is accurate, what makes it especially startling is that the face is the part of the human being where the greatest concentration of features occurs, since all the perceptual systems except touch are located here. Henri Bergson states this observation in a more expansive form, talking about objects in general as well as faces in particular. He criticizes "cerebral explanations" of memory that speak as though our "visual recollection of an object" entailed a physical impression or trace that "subsist[s] in the brain as it were on a sensitive plate or a phonographic disk." This could not be the case because then there "would be thousands or even millions" of traces for each stable object and even more for a continually mobile human face. What we "unquestionably" have instead is a "unique image, or . . . a practically invariable recollection of the object or person."[28] Whether or not we imagine a face as such a unitary and generalized object is debatable, but the description seems generally true of faces as well as of many objects of imagining: Pegasus and Yaweh, for example, both seem to present themselves as unitary rather than from a hundred points of view. But the flower, in contrast, immediately breaks into the specificity of lilacs, roses, and delphiniums, and each of these in turn, into a specification of a precise disposition of color at a certain moment in its maturation, its variations from center to edge. And this is true not only in the images we produce under authorial instruction (some of which I will turn to before long) but even in everyday daydreaming and conversation, hence under the verbal instruction of friends or the cheerful recommendations of gardening books.

The reliance on language, rather than photographs, in flower catalogs such as *Gilbert Wild's Daylilies* displays the same confidence in the flower's describability[29]—that is, in the reader's ability to construct from a set of phrases a clear mental im-

age. The entry for daylily "Satinique" begins, as do all entries in this catalog, with a coded specification of the month of the bloom, the size of the blossom, the length of a single petal, the length of the stamen, followed by several lines of description. The specification of the size of the blossom (in the case of Satinique, 5-inch bloom, 2 ⅜ petal, 1 ⅝ stamen) is important because it designates the compositional surface on which the description that follows takes place. Here is that description:

> Ruffled, slightly creped deep burgundy with slightly raised rib of same color, blue violet veining and shading, slight magenta eye, gold throat and slightly green heart. Beautiful satin finish. Sepals recurve giving blooms flat triangular look. Opens well after cold night.

The slender catalog gives approximately twenty such verbal descriptions a page for ninety pages, presenting sixteen hundred daylilies with a precision that makes it possible to distinguish any two, such as Oriental Garden, which is "soft yellow dusted with rose" and Oriental Influence, which is "buff yellow with lavender overlay on heavily diamond dusted segments." The way colors shift with the sky light—both because of changing weather and the changing hours of the day—is specified, as in the case of Iffy, whose "smooth melon" becomes under the sun "a snow pink," and again of Oakleigh, which "under completely cloudy skies" becomes a "rolled back pale peach with orchid overlay," or Copper Canyon, which looks most lovely after "hot, windy days." Sometimes the gradations in color under a given sky light are even specified by mysterious color charts: the daylily Real Wind (as perhaps you already know) has "vivid colors under clouds (6/28/77) Light orange 2,5 YR 8/6, Munsell Hue, with rose halo which is split by orchid rib going deep into gold green heart";[30] whereas, "under sun, Munsell Hue: moderate yellowish (10 R 8/6) to strong yellowish pink (10 R 7/9). Cupped bloom." The passages just cited are misleading because they are fragments, so let me give the full account of one daylily, say, American Revolution:

> Midseason, Repeat bloomer, 5 ½-inch bloom, 1 ⅞ petal; 1⅜ sepal. Very velvety black wine red, tiny green heart blends into a bit of yellow before meeting the black red segments which gently fold back: they seem to have a fine line on edges. Velvety finish . . . remains good at night. Buds are black red on outside. . . . top multiple branches which is good with so many rebloom scapes coming.

I will stop here, though I would very much like to recite Raspberry Dream, Raspberry Wine, Raindrop, Raining Violets, and Random Wit, as well as School Girl, See Here, and Someday Maybe. (I sense that there is one person in the country who names all the daylilies, the racehorses, and the lipsticks.)[31]

Thinness of Petals

In addition to size, shape, and localization, there is a fourth feature that contributes to the flower's imaginability. As I said in "On Vivacity," the imag-

ination has a special expertise in producing two-dimensional gauzy images. Phenomena in the actual physical world that have those same attributes of transparency or filminess (such as thin curtains, fog, and mist) can be more easily imitated in the mind than can thick or substantive phenomena. The gossamer quality of many flowers (columbine, companula, foxglove, sweet pea, rose of Sharon), the thinness and transparency of the petals (that lets one see the sunlight through them or see the shape of another overlapping petal coming from behind), gives them a kinship with the filmy substance, the substancelessness, of mental images. In this respect Gilbert Wild's daylilies are not the perfect instance of the ease of imagining flowers; for, although in the realm of fabrics satin and velvet are judged delicate, in the realm of flowers the satin of Satinique and the velvet of American Revolution seem too substantial. Many of the catalog entries for daylilies in fact directly specify that a particular flower has "good substance," a term not used for other species. Daylilies do not have the thinness of ordinary flowers, the airiness of Cobweb and Peaseblossom.

Aristotle called this thinness of plants their "rarity." It is, he argued, their rarity, their lack of material density, that lets them suddenly grow to maturity in a single day: "The material of which the plant is formed is near at hand, and therefore its generation is quick, and it grows and increases, because it is rare, more quickly than if it were dense."[32] Aristotle conceives of rarity not as an absence of something, but as a positive possession; the plant "has rarity." Thus he writes "Any body which *has* considerable *rarity* tends to rise upwards, for the air supports it. This we often see when we throw a gold coin or some other heavy substance into the water and it immediately sinks; whereas if we throw in a piece of wood, which *has rarity* in it, it does not sink. . . . That which has rarity can never altogether sink."[33]

But the rarity of petals is more often conceived of as a subtractive process, and I want to quickly sketch out three forms of the subtractive. The first is a straightforward verbal instruction to erase what is there; the second is the lifting of the color off the face of the flower; the third is the placing of the flower in an arc between the material and the immaterial, so that its passage back and forth is implied. To be fair to Gilbert Wild's beautiful daylilies, they are not so substantive, so thick or so coarse, as I a moment ago implied. Even here the subtractive quality is key, as is audible in the catalog's constant recourse to the word "slightly." Satinique, one may recall, is a "slightly creped deep burgundy with slightly raised rib" and has a "slight magenta eye" and "slightly green heart." Oriental Garden does not have rose but merely a dust of rose, as Oriental Influence has not quite lavender but merely its overlay. And Oakleigh, "under completely cloudy skies," is not pale peach but "a *rolled back* pale peach." Its pale peach must once have been there but has apparently been taken away. The four- or five-inch blossoms become small pools of color that appear and disappear in front of our eyes.

What I was earlier calling the flower's localization and what I now want to call

its rarity may seem to urge us in two different directions, since I was then attending to the saturated quality of its surface, its being filled in, and I now appear to stress its quality of subtraction. But the two are compatible, for it is the vivacity (or filled-in) quality of color that remains and the substance that falls away. In Ashbery's yellow flash of the tulip, the color lifts off the already delicate surface and passes, still more rarefied but completely filled in, into the mind, retaining its petal shape. The breaking away of color from substance also recurs in many of Rilke's poems. Rilke says of the umbelled blossoms of the blue hydrangea that they

> are a blue
> they do not bear, only mirror from far away.[34]

Detached and dematerialized, the shapes of color pass into our mental space. At the end of the poem, a detached color-patch of blue touches a detached color-patch of green and is suddenly vivified, an event that can be felt palpably in the mind as the caress of one color glances over, touches down on, the surface of the other. Rilke describes the revivification of the blue as the "delight" it feels in touching the green, and this same account of self-experiencing pleasure as colors lift away or touch one another occurs in "The Bowl of Roses." Here Rilke combines the Aristotelian account of color (changing as the flower matures) with an account that emphasizes the arc from material location to dematerialized image:

> And was opening-out too much for this one,
> since in the air its indescribable pink
> took on the bitter aftertaste of violet?
> And that cambric one, is it not a dress
> in which, still soft and breath-warm, the chemise
> clings, both of them cast off at once
> in the morning shadows of the old forest pool?[35]

The second form of subtraction, then, the lifting of the color off the face of the flower, sometimes comes to be inseparable from the third form of subtraction, the placing of the flower in the arc between material and immaterial. Rousseau's many-pages-long dictionary entry for *flower* opens with a statement about the irresistible ease of imagining a flower ("If I should let my imagination surrender to the sweet sensations which this word seems to evoke . . . ") and then proceeds to the way the flower eludes formal botanical definition because it remains even after each seemingly essential part has been subtracted: "The essence of the flower lies not in the corolla," since the corolla is either missing or almost invisible in wheat, mosses, beech, oak, alder, hazel, and pine, which are nonetheless flowers; nor can the flower lie in the calyx, which is missing in the tulip and lily ("and one will not say that a Tulip or a Lily is not a flower"); nor can it lie in the pistils and stamens ("Now in the whole of the Melon family . . . half the flowers are without

a pistil, the other half without stamens; yet this deprivation does not prevent them from being called and from being, each and every one of them, flowers").[36] Friedrich Schiller, too, in one of the rare invocations of a concrete object in *Aesthetic Education of Man*, places the flower in the space of passage between material and immaterial: "In saying that the flower blooms and fades, we make the flower the thing that persists through the transformation and lend it, so to say, a personality [eine Person] in which both those conditions are manifested."[37]

This explanation of the easily imagined as something that can enter the mind precisely because it is always already in a state of passage from the material to the dematerialized was present, but hidden, in the account of solidity I gave in "On Vivacity." I cited there a sequence of passages in which the passing of a film over an object asserted to be solid worked through the processes of complete and incomplete kinetic occlusion to produce the mimesis of solidity. A filmy object conferred solidity on the surface beneath. I did not have occasion to mention how frequently the filmy object associated with this process is a flower. The "palpable iridescence," for example, that Des Esseintes intends to have permanently moving back across his floor in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature* emanates from the jewels implanted in the shell of a tortoise. Des Esseintes's choice of jewels is determined by the quality of light they throw outward: the purplish reds and "sharp bursts of fire" from uvarovite and translucent minerals; the icy blues and deep sea greens flashing deceptively from sapphirines, cymophanes, and Ceylon cat's-eyes; and finally the "feeble luster" emanating from the stones selected for the "edging of the shell" so as not to compete with the brilliance of the arrangement of the interior.[38] That arrangement at the interior, the arrangement that orchestrates the hurling of the jeweled light, is in its specified design a bouquet of flowers.

In Virginia Woolf's short story "The Mark on the Wall" a woman watches an unidentifiable shadow on the wall progress through successive materializations: first a mark, then a small residue from a rose leaf, then a "gigantic old nail driven in two hundred years ago," then a rent in the wood itself, then a garden snail. During this progressive solidification, the woman herself metamorphoses into a tree. Film, flower, and wall are brought into rapid companionship even in the story's opening sentences: "Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall. . . . So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl on the mantelpiece."[39] In William Wordsworth, too, the solidity of earth is established by the small galaxies of floral starlight continually hovering several inches above its surface. Stars of the day is how he imagines the field flowers in "Evening Voluntaries," with their "dazzling sheen" until twilight restores the green. Another poem addresses the daisy, "Yet like a star, with glittering crest / Self-poised in air thou seem'st to rest." The "glittering multitudes" reappear wherever the daisies grow.[40] There are many other instances: Rilke's filmy piece of lace whose interior pattern is a flower; Kant's tiny

inventory of the instances of pure beauty—flowers, birds, crustaceans, music, geometric form—that expands to include the tonally anomalous "foliage . . . on wallpaper"; the red-gold river of light in Dante's *Paradiso* that when it runs between flower-covered banks, "issue[s] living sparks, which settled on the flowers on all sides . . . and then, as if intoxicated with the odors, they again plunged [back] into the amazing flood."[41]

Flowers can be taken as the representative of the imagination because of the ease of imagining them. That ease is in turn attributable to *their* size and the size of our heads, *their* shape and the shape of our eyes, *their* intense localization and the radius of our compositional powers, *their* rarity that lets them rise and enter our brains and our willingness to receive them as the template for the production of other, more resistant compositions. It is clear: we were made for one another. No wonder the kind of cross-species desire that Ovid recommends turns out to be key to imaginative life, to the bringing forth of what is fresh. (Homer shows us "what is great," said Addison; Virgil, "what is beautiful"; and Ovid, "what is new."[42]

When a long period elapses between *reading* Ovid and *thinking* about Ovid, one can make the mistake of believing that humans turn into trees and plants simply to resist pursuit, to bring to a decisive end the troublesome lovemaking. But even after the transformation into bark-covered, branching laurel or into reedy grasses, the lovemaking goes on in graphically vegetable detail; the rumor that these trees and flowers used to be humans seems merely an excuse to let them love each other now. Though we are now, by comparison, more prudential and constrained in our sexual preferences, cross-species desire has not wholly disappeared: Diane Ackerman points out the odd fact that when human beings want to attract other human beings, they usually wear not their own scent but the scent of flowers.[43]

I want to turn, very briefly, to a final question: What is it about imaginative cognition that the image of the flower displays?[44] I have suggested that in some very serious way the tissue of the flower is the work table on which imaginative life gets processed; and this point needs to be unfolded in more detail.

Perceptual Mimesis

Aristotle said that what distinguishes human beings from other creatures is our capacity to love something without wanting to ingest it. All animals, including human beings, he writes in *Sense and Sensibilia*, have the power to smell in order to eat; humans alone have a second reason to smell, namely to smell flowers, with no interest at all in eating them. Our smelling of food, says Aristotle, is discontinuous and contingent—whether something smells good depends on whether we are hungry—whereas our smelling of flowers is noncontingent and ongoing.[45] (The citizenry of California and several other regions have somewhat

confounded these categories by their habit of eating flowers, but in many places in the world the Aristotelian distinction still holds true.) Of course smelling the flowers, seeing the flowers, touching the flowers, imagining the flowers is also a way of ingesting or at least interiorizing them, since we carry them in as objects of perception and imagining. Ludwig Wittgenstein said that when one sees something beautiful—an eyelid, a cathedral—the hand wants to draw it.[46] Like smelling, like imagining, this too is an act of interiorization, the yearning to incorporate, to make a residual image.

What I want to argue is that we interiorize the flower—we seize upon the flower as the proper object of the imagination—because it expresses the distinct quality of cognition at work in imagining. The formal properties of the act are displayed in the content of its object. It is important to stress that I am not here speaking about our projetion of cognition outward onto flowers, trees, rocks (the process that has, since Ruskin, gone by the name "pathetic fallacy"), since what is at issue is not the lifting of our mental processes out onto the flower but the interiorization of the flower into the brain. It is not *our* intellect that is being conferred on the plant, but the plant's on us. In picturing a flower in the brain, it is the plant's own strange cognition or subcognition that is being used to display the peculiar nature of imaginative cognition. What is imagining like? Like being a plant. What is imagining? It is *not*-perception: it is instead the quasi-percipient, the slightly percipient, the almost percipient, the not yet percipient, the after percipient, of perceptual mimesis. Like the rolled-back pale pink of the daylily Oakleigh, it is not sentience but sentience rolled back.

Accounts of the sentience of plants often formulate it in terms of either the foreimage or the afterimage of perception. For the poet Louise Glück, for example, the full moment of the flower is the "not yet" moment of spring, "hovering in a doorway," the "preparation," the time "before the appearance."[47] For Ovid it is the afterimage, as in his extraordinary use of the word *still*:

> When her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts
> Were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves,
> . . . . . .
> Apollo loved her *still*. He placed his hand
> Where he had hoped and felt the heart *still* beating
> Under the bark; and he embraced the branches
> As if they *still* were limbs.[48]

When Pan holds Syrinx, he finds the nymph gone and in her place only the afterimage, "only reeds." The word "only" would seem to signal the end of the story or a swerve into frustration. We are given instead an account of the way the soft stirring of their lovemaking produces the flutes of Pan, and "he called them Syrinx, still."[49] Throughout Ovid, the great force of "the perennial"—narcissus, tree,

or reeds—comes from its quality of afterimage, of its (even after it has gone) being there *still*.

The attempt to specify with precision the "almost" in the "almost percipience" of plants extends not just to the question of whether or not they nourish themselves, whether they feel pleasure[50] or pain, which sense-modality their own activities approximate, whether they have souls (the third kind of soul, said Plato; incidental souls, says Louise Glück), but even whether or not they are alive. Plato and Aristotle are hesitant to confer yet cannot but confer. Plato says in the *Timaeus*, "Everything that has life has every right to be called a living thing."[51] Yet the assertiveness seems there to answer some prior doubt, as though the full text should read: "The plant is *not* a living creature; yet it *is* alive; so it *must be* a living thing," since (and now the actual sentence) "everything that has life has every right to be called a living thing." Aristotle's treatise on plants opens, "Life is found in animals and plants; but while in animals it is clearly manifest, in plants it is hidden and not evident."[52] If they are not sentient, are they not living? If they are certainly living, are they not then certainly sentient?

Pre-image and afterimage, subsentient and supersentient, the plant exposes the shape of a mental process that combines the almost percipient with a kind of transitory exactness. It is as though the very precision required to find the exquisitely poised actuality of the flower's "vague sentience" manifests itself as a form of acuity.

This perceptual acuity entails both vision and touch. The petal becomes the imagination's surrogate retina. It is estimated that the total skin surface in an adult human being is three thousand square inches.[53] Compared to that expanse, the surface covered by the retinas is a tiny patch of membrane: Rilke calls them small tears in fate.[54] Yet physiologically, 38 percent of all sensory experience takes place against that tiny surface.[55] Eyes are, according to neurobiologists, the direct outcropping of the brain:[56] not content to receive messages by mediation, the brain has moved out to the surface of the skull in order to rub up against the world directly (no wonder it is overwhelming to look into another person's eyes; one beholds directly the moist tissue of the person's brain). As striking as the relation of eye and brain is the relation of eye, brain, and plant. The fifteen-volume 1958 *System of Opthalmology* begins by describing the antecedents of human perception in the membranes of plants, the precedents for the retina in the photochemical reactions of leaves and flowers that liberate energy and produce changes in metabolic activity and variations of movement. Tracing the path from "vague sentiency to apperception," Sir Stewart Duke-Elder writes about the key moment when a "diffuse reactivity" in one-celled organisms gave way to the ability of a multicelled organism to pass signals from receptor tissues to motor tissues. "In this way," he writes, "the effects of light upon metabolism, orientation and pigmentation became correlated through primitive nerve-nets and then became in-

tegrated in the ganglia of the central nervous system; and eventually, when the nervous pathways from the eyes were projected into a head-ganglion and ultimately into the fore-brain, the highly complex faculties of vision and apperception evolved."[57]

It was the goal and the accomplishment of Charles Darwin's final book, *The Power of Movement in Plants*, to demonstrate that "light [acts] on the tissue of plants almost in the same manner as it does on the nervous system of an animal."[58] The key transition from "vague" sentience to the "localization of sensitivity" that carries with it the ability to transmit influence "from an excited part to another which consequently moves," was already accomplished in plants.[59] Our nervous system, Darwin writes, is a more perfect transmissibility of the thing plants can already do. Darwin attached delicate instruments to the plants that let them trace on pieces of glass their intricate movements "oscillating up and down during the day." The resulting line drawings fill the book: each looks not like a cardiogram, jig-jagging along regularly, but like the tracing of several constellations superimposed on one another, or like the visual coding system of an elaborate dance. As the parts of the plant above the ground are exquisitely sensitive to light, so the tip of the radicle beneath the earth is so sensitive to touch that it elicits from Darwin periodic outcries: "We believe that there is no structure in plants more wonderful, as far as its functions are concerned, than the tip of the radicle."[60] He writes in the final sentence of this, his final work: "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the tip of the radicle thus endowed, and having the power of directing the movements of the adjoining parts, acts like the brain . . . receiving impressions from the sense-organs, and directing the several movements" (418).

Darwin tracks the motion of tiny seedlings, the motion of the tip of the radicle, the motion of the leaf as it turns its edge to the sunlight to prevent the injuring rays from falling on its broader surfaces, the overall movement of a giant acacia tree whose "every growing shoot is constantly describing small ellipses: as is each petiole, sub-petiole, and leaflet," each "flower pendule," and beneath the earth the "tip of each rootlet endeavour[ing] to sweep small ellipses or circles" against the resistant ground (409). He also tracks the intricate patterns of waking and sleeping in the woodbine, the plant that haunts the third volume of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, and whose sleep patterns were first recorded by Linnaeus in a flower clock specifying the regular waking hour of red poppies, speedwell, woodbine, and white campion.[61]

For both Rilke and Darwin, the petal's sensitivity to light and, equally, its sensitivity to touch are precocious of our own perception. The plant's own experience of weight on its leaves, of gravitational excitation during the curling of a tendril, of its ability to distinguish hard from soft are described at length by Darwin in passages that seem kindred to the felt experience of imagining: the barely perceptible weight of light falling on arms, the touch of an eyelid glancing across the surface of the eye, the brush of an image against an image. For the Greek poets,

the feel of light, not as it strikes the retina but as it falls elsewhere on the three-thousand-square-inch surface of the human being, is identical with being alive: "The light of the sun shines on him no more," says Neoptolemus of the dead Ajax, and Oedipus at Colonus, knowing he will in a moment leave the world, holds out his arms to let the sun fall across their full surface: "O sunlight of no light! Once you were mine! / This is the last my flesh will feel of you."[62] The child Polyxena, about to be sacrificed by the Greek army, gives the same salutation, "This is the last time I shall ever see the sun," and calibrates her stay in the world by the small corridor of light through which she will pass as she walks to the place of execution:

> O light! I still can say that word; but all the light
> That now belongs to me is what remains between
> This moment and the sword beside Achilles' tomb.[63]

Each responds to the small channel of sunlight, as does Renoir with his anemones ("I think I'm beginning to understand something"), and Manet with the lavender and silver of his lilac-filled water glass. What is the feeling when image rubs against image, when one receives the instruction to glance the image of Golo across the image of the Combray wall, or to flash the light off the solid floor bearing the weight of Des Esseintes, or to throw the shadow on Virginia Woolf's page, or to lift and hold a sheen of starlight a few inches above the grass? The feeling (the almost percipience, the after percipience) of a flower, says Rilke. The felt experience of imagining, the interior brushing of one image against another, is the way it feels when two petals touch one another:

> And then like this: that a feeling begins,
> because flower petals touch flower petals?
> And this: that one opens like a lid,
> and under it lie only eyelids,
> all closed, as if they, sleeping tenfold,
> had to damp an inner power of sight.
> And this above all: that through these petals
> light must pass.[64]

Notes

I am grateful to Helen Vendler for her generous and precise conversations about poetry. My thanks, too, to my flower-obsessed friends and siblings, Patsy Jones, Kathy Pollak, Sandy Baptie, and daylily-loving Richard Sennett. This essay was originally written for the 1992 Avenali Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley.

1. John Ashbery, "And *Ut Pictura Poesis* Is Her Name," in *Selected Poems* (New York, 1985), 235.
2. John Ashbery, "Whatever It Is, Wherever You Are," in *A Wave: Poems by John Ashbery* (New York, 1985), 63.
3. Seamus Heaney, "Feeling into Words," in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose, 1968–78* (New York, 1980), 14. The identification of poets with plants, striking in the case of both Seamus Heaney and Marcel Proust, reaches perhaps its most extreme instance in Rainer Maria Rilke. The place of roses in his self-composed epitaph, and the part played by the thorn of a rose in "accelerating" his death, are described with great power by Ralph Freedman in the final chapter of *Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York, 1996), 530, 531, 546, 548. But Rilke's sense of himself as a flower is equally visible in earlier years: the first journal he started (1895) was called *Chicory Flowers* (Wegwarten), a title influenced by the Zurich journal *Sonnenblumen*, as well as by the fifteenth-century Paracelsean legend that "once in each century . . . the chicory flower becomes a living person"; Freedman, *Life of a Poet*, 41, 42. It is not hard to guess what "living person" in particular Rilke might have believed was his century's flower.
4. It might seem tempting to say that imagining is only as inseparable from its object as the perceptual acts (of which imagining is mimetic) are inseparable from theirs: the acts of seeing and hearing, for example, are often almost identical with the objects seen and heard. But, in fact, some perceptual states, such as touch, are much less confined to their object, and even seeing and hearing undergo a level of variation to which imagining is not subject. For a fuller account, see Elaine Scarry, "Pain and Imagining," in *The Body in Pain* (New York, 1985).
5. For a more complete account of the difference between the counterfactual and the counterfictional actions of imagining, see Elaine Scarry, "On Vivacity: The Difference Between Daydreaming and Imagining-Under-Authorial-Instruction," *Representations* (Fall 1995).
6. The association of flowers with beauty is long-standing. Plato says in both *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* that beauty, truth, and goodness exist together in the immortal realm, but beauty differs from the other two by having a "clearly discernible" presence in the material world: "Beauty shone bright in the world above, and [on earth] too it still gleams clearest. . . . As things are it is only beauty which has the privilege of being both the most clearly discerned and the most lovely"; Plato *Phaedrus* 250, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York, 1973). This "clearly discernible" material thing summons our attention, eventually carrying us to immortal beauty, as well as to its less clearly discernible counterparts, truth and goodness.

   It is almost certainly because flowers, whether seen or daydreamed, have this feature of "clear discernibility" that they are so bound up with beauty. Agathon in the *Symposium* says we know we are in the presence of the god Love when we see flowers: "The beauty of [the god's] complexion is shown by his living among flowers; he never settles in any abode . . . that is incapable of blooming . . . but wherever he finds a spot that is flowery and fragrant, there he settles and abides"; Plato *Symposium* 196B, trans. Walter Hamilton (New York, 1951). Thus Marsilio Ficino, in his 1475 *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, says that "beauty is the blossom, so to speak, of goodness," in Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, eds., *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger* (Chicago, 1976), 217.

   This notion of beauty's "clear discernibility," with its inherent power to summon, is intimately bound up with Thomas Aquinas's idea of "*claritas*" and with Dante's notion of a "greeting." The three phenomena—beauty, flowers, and clear discernibility—

continue to be linked both during periods when beauty is greatly honored and during periods when it is rejected or demoted. Both Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, in their writings on the beautiful and the sublime, take flowers as the key instance of the former: "It is the flowery species . . . that gives us the liveliest idea of beauty" says Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford, 1990), 105, and Kant contrasts the non–clearly discernible shadows of the sublime's sacred grove with the flower beds of beauty in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley, 1960), 47. The preference for the sublime in modern thought is a preference for objects that are beyond the radius of our compositional powers, a preference whose timing coincides with the disappearance of beauty's metaphysical referent.

7. In his "Fifth Letter to Madame Delessert," 16 July 1772, in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Botany, A Study of Pure Curiosity: Botanical Letters and Notes Towards a Dictionary of Botanical Terms*, trans. Kate Ottevanger (London, 1979), 66–85, for example, Rousseau very overtly requires his correspondent mentally to construct the radiating spokes of the umbelliferous family ("Imagine a long and fairly straight stem, with alternate leaves . . ."[70]), periodically interrupting his description to coach and encourage ("If you are able to form a picture of what I have just described to you, you will have in your mind . . . " [72]), and finally after many pages congratulating her:

   > Your remarkable progress, dear cousin, and your patience have so emboldened me that, with no regard for your suffering, I have dared to describe the family of the umbellifers without letting you set eyes on a single example; and this must needs have made much greater demands on your concentration. I am certain, however, that reading as you do, after you have looked over my letter once or twice, you will not fail to recognize an umbellifer in flower when you come across one; and at this time of the year, you cannot fail to find several in gardens and in the countryside. (80)

   In other letters, Rousseau instructs Madame Delessert to look for, or even pick, an actual flower in bloom at the time of writing, as he does with the lily (first letter), the sweet pea (third letter), and the daisy (sixth letter). Here his instructions (e.g., pull the petal gently from below, gently tear the calyx exposing what is underneath) may be understood either to require a literal act of touching the physical flower or instead to specify a set of mental steps to construct the flower's structure imagistically.
8. Robert Nozick, when invited to try this mental experiment, immediately agreed that the image can be produced as easily in the forearm as in the forehead but questioned whether the image in the forearm is really in the forearm or in a picture of the forearm held in the forehead; Robert Nozick, conversation with author, September 1994.
9. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Bowl of Roses," in *New Poems [1907]*, trans. Edward Snow, rev. paperback trans. (San Francisco, 1984), 192–97.
10. Walt Whitman, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," in *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, 1982), 466.
11. Jean Hagstrum comes up with the wonderful term *mental retina* (though he is not speaking about petals) in *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago, 1958), xx.
12. In the case of Whitman, Ashbery, and William Blake, the flower remains intact even when its petals are used as the surface on which to construct other images. The function of the flower as a template becomes even more strikingly evident in instances where the flower essentially disappears into the other image. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (New York, 1991), is one of the most flower-

filled of all novels; whole runs of pages occur in which a flower appears on every page. Although Flaubert's flowers sometimes remain ravishingly intact as flowers—whether in garden or meadow or window box—at other times they are introduced for their sheer power as template, particularly in constructing the face: an opera singer's pale face emerges beneath "a wreath of orange blossoms in her hair" (253); the "gentle features of the Virgin [Mary] among the bluish clouds of rising incense" are prepared for by a mist "rising among the bare poplars, blurring their outlines with a tinge of purple that was paler and more transparent than the sheerest gauze caught in their branches" (125); a dew that "garnished the cabbages with silvery lace, and joined head to head with long shining filaments" leads to the face of a priest dusted with frost and plaster (71); one woman's face is said to be as spotted as a meadow filled with flowers (169); and of another face, Flaubert writes "Not a hair was out of place in the blond chin whisker outlining his jaw: It was like the edging of a flower bed around his long dreary face with its small eyes and hooked nose" (86). Summarized and made explicit, the images sound humorous, but in context, the flowers are barely noticed yet constantly introduced as though continually to reignite our image-making power with clematis, forget-me-nots, rosettes, and cactus.

13. Stephen Michael Kosslyn, "Measuring the Visual Angle of the Mind's Eye," *Cognitive Psychology* 10 (1978): 381.
14. Kosslyn, in "Measuring the Visual Angle of the Mind's Eye," also describes other experiments suggesting that imaginary mimesis follows the spatial constraints of actual perception: people asked to describe the shape of a horse's ears, for example, answer more quickly than people who (before being asked the shape of the ears) are first asked to picture the place where a horse's tail meets the horse's back: presumably they answer more slowly because they must mentally move the long distance across the horse's back.
15. Joseph Addison, "On the Pleasures of the Imagination," Paper 5, *Spectator* no. 415, 26 June 1712, in *The Spectator: With a Historical and Biographical Preface*, ed. A. Chalmers (Boston, 1872), 6:147, 148.
16. Virginia Woolf, "The Mark on the Wall," in *Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (New York, 1985), 84.
17. John Ruskin, *The Queen of the Air: Being a Study of the Greek Myths of Cloud and Storm* (London, 1906). Scholars disagree about whether *Queen of the Air* is the first reference to Ruskin in Proust's correspondence, but all agree that he speaks of it by December 1899 at the latest. See Richard Macksey's introduction to Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin: Prefaces to* La Bible d'Amiens *and* Sésame et les lys *with Selections from the Notes to the Translated Texts*, ed. and trans. Jean Autret, William Burford, and Phillip J. Wolfe (New Haven, Conn., 1987), xviii–xix n. 4.
18. Ruskin, *Queen of the Air*, 112, 116, 117, 118.
19. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Third Letter to Madame Delessert," 16 May 1772, Rousseau, *Botany*, 48, 52; and see "Fifth Letter," 72, 76.
20. D. H. Lawrence, "Purple Anemones," in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers!* (Santa Rosa, Calif., 1992), 64.
21. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Opium Poppy," in *New Poems [1908]: The Other Part*, trans. Edward Snow, rev. paperback trans. (San Francisco, 1987), 185. Rilke's language in the first line cited is "die willig waren, offen und konkav." The two final lines read: "gefranste Kelche auseinanderschlagend,/die fieberhaft das Mohngefäss umgeben."
22. Kosslyn, "Measuring the Visual Angle of the Mind's Eye," 363.
23. All the numbers given here have been rounded off for ease in picturing. A few fairly

small paintings appeared in the 1870s or in 1880 (*Portrait of Mallarmé*, 1876, 11 x 14 in.; *At the Cafe*, 1878, 19 x 15 in.; and *Interior at Cafe*, 1880, 12 x 18 in.), but they are overwhelmed by the much greater number of large canvases. For reproduction and analysis of the lilac, rose, and water glass paintings, see Andrew Forge and Robert Gordon, *The Last Flowers of Manet*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1986).

The account given here about the radius of our compositional powers perhaps holds true even for large paintings. A large landscape painting, for example, brings within the range of our constructive powers the beauty of the actual landscape, which, because of its scale, may—except from a very select viewing point—be outside the range in which the beautiful can be comprehended.

24. This account of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's last day (3 December 1919) is given both by Lawrence Hanson, *Renoir: The Man, the Painter, and His World* (New York, 1968), 294, and by Jean Renoir, *Renoir, My Father*, trans. Randolph Weaver and Dorothy Weaver (London, 1962), 404. A rogue account is given by Ambroise Vollard's *Renoir: An Intimate Record* (New York, 1934), 225.
25. Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (New York, 1905), 57. Hardy almost never allows any description to masquerade as the universal case, so when he does say something is the universal case, the sentence carries. "By the time he walked three or four miles every shape in the landscape had assumed a uniform hue of blackness" (91). Uniformity comes before us as an exceptional and extraordinary state.
26. Aristotle *On Colours* 796a, 796b, trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1984).
27. Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of Imagination* (New York, 1991), 177.
28. Henri Bergson, "The Soul and the Body," lecture delivered in Paris, at Foi et Vie, 28 April 1912, in Henri Bergson, *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, trans. H. Wildon Carr (Westport, Conn., 1975), 63–64. Bergson goes on to apply the same observation to acoustical images, specifically words: "The same word, pronounced by different persons, or by the same person at different times in different sentences, gives phonograms which do not coincide with one another. How, then, can the recollection of the sound of a word—a recollection which is relatively invariable and unique—be comparable to a phonogram?" (64).
29. *Gilbert Wild's Daylilies* (Sarcoxie, Mo., 1991).
30. The painter A. H. Munsell originated his color notation system in 1898 and worked to adjust and perfect it for the next seventeen years. In addition to his widely dispersed color charts, Munsell also developed exercises for helping painters to think about color arrays three-dimensionally. In one exercise, he suggests imagining an orange with five segments pulled slightly apart but still joined at the bottom: "All the reds we have ever seen are gathered into one of those sections, all the yellows in another, all the greens in a third," etc. His choice of an orange is relevant to the present inquiry. It would seem counterintuitive that the act of imagining color could be assisted by mentally displaying all colors on a sphere that is itself already saturated with one color in particular. But here again vegetable matter is assumed to be a template that will make the full array of colors more easily picturable despite the competition from a single color; A. H. Munsell, *A Color Notation: An Illustrated System Defining All Colors and Their Relations by Measured Scales of Hue, Value, and Chroma* (Baltimore, 1947), 17. See also A. H. Munsell, *Atlas of the Munsell Color System* (Malden, Mass., 1915), a supplement to the *Color Notation* handbook with many color charts in two and three dimensions).
31. Random Wit is clearly a racehorse, and See Here is a lipstick.

32. Aristotle *On Plants* 822b, trans. E. S. Forster, in *Complete Works*, vol. 2.
33. Aristotle *On Plants* 823a (my emphasis).
34. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Blue Hydrangea," in *New Poems [1907]*, 113.
35. Rilke, "Bowl of Roses," 197.
36. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Flower," in *Notes Towards a Dictionary of Botanical Terms*, in *Botany*, 134.
37. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. and introd. Reginald Snell (New York, 1965), 58.
38. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1959), 55, 56.
39. Woolf, "Mark on the Wall," 83.
40. William Wordsworth, "Evening Voluntaries VI," "To the Same Flower," "To the Daisy," in *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, eds. Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt (London, 1936), 358, 125, 453.
41. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1982), 30.ll.61–69.
42. Joseph Addison, "On the Pleasures of the Imagination," Paper 7, *Spectator* no. 417, 28 June 1712, in Chalmers, *The Spectator*, 6: 154, 156, 157.
43. Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York, 1991), 12. As Stephen Greenblatt points out to me, Andrew Marvell, in lines 27–32 of "The Garden," delights in Ovid's celebration of cross-species desire: "The gods, that mortal beauty chase,/ Still in a tree did end their race./ Apollo hunted Daphne so,/ Only that she might laurel grow./ And Pan did after Syrinx speed,/ Not as a nymph, but for a reed"; in *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (London, 1985), 100. Marvell promises that if he ever carves the name of a beloved in a tree, it will be not a human name but the name of the tree itself (lines 19–24).
44. Rousseau thought that philosophic cognition also required flowers: "L'étude de la nature nous détache de nous-même et nous élève à son auteur. C'est en ce sens qu'on devient vraiment philosophe; c'est ainsi que l'histoire naturelle et la botanique ont un usage pour la sagesse et pour la vertu"; "À Madame la duchesse de Portland," 3 septembre 1766, cited by Bernard Gagnebin in his introduction to *Lettres sur la botanique par Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris, 1962), xxxv.
45. Aristotle *Sense and Sensibilia* 444a, trans. J. I. Beare, in *Complete Works*, vol. 1.
46. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago, 1980), 24e: "What if I were to say that in both cases my hand feels tempted to draw them?"
47. Louise Glück, "The Doorway," in *The Wild Iris* (Hopewell, N.J., 1992), 33.
48. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.549–50, 554–57, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, 1955) (my emphasis). Humphries's beautiful threefold repetition of the word *still* is prompted by Ovid's opening *hanc quoque*, which John Dryden also translates *still* as does the early-eighteenth-century Samuel Garth translation "by various authors"; Frank Justus Miller in the 1984 revised Loeb translation and Mary Innes in a 1958 Penguin translation both give the phrase as *even* or *even now*, bringing to mind the etymological connection of *even* with *after* or *following upon* or *late* (C. T. Onions, *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, s.v. "even"; Robert K. Barnhart, *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology*, s.v. "even"), as well as the use of *still* to mean "even now" or "even then" first found in 1535 (Barnhart, *Etymology*, s.v. "still"). Humphries's second use of *still* is prompted by Ovid's *adhuc* which is widely but not universally translated *still* (Dryden, Garth's "various authors," Innes, Miller). Humphries's third *still* is prompted by the counterfactual *ut* (as when, as if), the *still* intensifying the carrying forward into the present of a condition that is only now an afterimage. The Innes translation is the only

one other than the Humphries that explicitly marks this third moment, in her case with the word *even*, and hence is the only one that, like the Humphries, has a threefold repetition in this set of lines. But translators who give two repetitions (Dryden, Miller, Garth's "various authors") often construct the passage so that *still* carries into the lines describing the embrace; even in instances where there is only a single iteration, the word carries throughout the full set of lines, in part because of the sense of "lingering" and "remaining" (see the Brookes More translation and again the A. E. Watts 1980 translation). The force of the word *still* in part comes from the act of stopping—that is, from the nature of this particular metamorphosis, Daphne's sudden immobilization, and in part from the way the word underscores what is perpetual (perpetually green, 1.567) and enduring (the laurel crown, 1.559) in a world of change. But a special power comes from the sense of afterimage.

49. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1.705, 712. Here Humphries's use of the word *still* is prompted by Ovid's use of the verb *kept* (*nomen tenuisse puellae*), which many translators also render with a verb: "He took and kept her name" (Miller); "He made her name endure" (Watts); "He preserved the girl's name" (Innes). Dryden, like Humphries, uses the word *still* ("he still retains her name"); but Humphries, by making the act of preservation a direct speech act, writes a uniquely beautiful line, "He called them Syrinx, still."
50. Whether the sense of pleasure is rapture (as in Ruskin), exhilaration (as in Virgil), or subdelight (in D. H. Lawrence).
51. Plato *Timaeus* 77, in *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. and introd. Desmond Lee (New York, 1977).
52. Aristotle *On Plants* 815a.
53. W. Montagna, "The Skin," *Scientific American* 11 (1959): 58–59, cited in Harvey Richard Schiffman, *Sensation and Perception: An Integrated Approach* (New York, 1976), 95.
54. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Lace," in *New Poems [1907]*, 93.
55. Sir Stewart Duke-Elder, *The Eye in Evolution*, vol. 1 of *System of Ophthalmology* (London, 1958), 3.
56. Marcus Meister, "The Retina" (lecture presented at the Science Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass., October 1994).
57. Duke-Elder, *Eye in Evolution*, 4, 6.
58. Charles Darwin, *The Power of Movement in Plants*, vol. 27 of *The Works of Charles Darwin*, ed. Paul H. Barrett and R. B. Freeman (London, 1989), 415.
59. "Vague" in the sense used by Duke-Elder, *Eye in Evolution*, 4; "localization of sensitivity" in the sense used by Darwin, *Power of Movement in Plants*, 418.
60. Darwin, *Power of Movement in Plants*, 418.
61. Linnaeus's flower clock is described by Duke-Elder, *Eye in Evolution*, 10.
62. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, trans. Kenneth Cavander, in *Antigone, Oedipus the King, Electra, Philoctetes*, ed. Robert Corrigan (New York, 1965), 189.
63. Euripides *Hecabe* 1.410, 2.435–37, in *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. and introd. Philip Vallacott (New York, 1963).
64. Rilke, "Bowl of Roses," 193–95.