Flowers as 'free beauties of nature'

Patrick Hutchings

Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of an end.

Immanuel Kant

Flowers are for Kant the prime example of *free beauty*. Indeed Kant's distinction between free beauty, *pulchritudo vaga*, and beauty which is merely dependent, *pulchritudo adhaerens*, almost depends on our seeing flowers as he would have us see them. The prime example seems to set the sense of the idea.

The distinction between the two kinds of beauty may be seen from a number of points of view:

- a) pulchritudo vaga may be seen as set up in opposition to the neo-Classical aesthetic in which 'a beautiful instance or example of X' tended to be seen eo ipso as 'a beautiful x'. Much of Sir Joshua Reynolds' talk of central form in the Discourses seems to recommend this elision from 'a beautiful example' to 'a beautiful', simpliciter.
- b) pulchritudo vaga may be seen as the key to abstract art (a point which I have argued elsewhere). And, of course, Kant had seen no abstract art—and had to talk, a little unconvincingly perhaps, about the 'absolute' beauties of wall-paper.

The famous passage of Kant's third critique reads as follows:

Flowers are free beauties of nature. Hardly any one but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower, and even he, while recognizing in the flower the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end when using his taste to judge of its beauty. Hence no perfection of any kind—no internal finality, as something to which the arrangement of the manifold is related—underlies this judgement. Many birds (the parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise), and a number of crustacea, are self-subsisting beauties which are not appurtenant to any object defined with respect to its end, but please freely and on their own account. So designs à la grecque, foliage for framework or on wall-papers, &c., have no intrinsic meaning; they represent nothing—no Object under a definite concept—and are free beauties. (C.J., p.72)

The essence of pulchritudo vaga is, with respect to judgements of taste, a prescinding by the person making the judgement from the end, even if this is

manifest, of the thing judged beautiful. To put it in Aristotelian terms, the formal cause in cases of beauty must be severed from the final cause. This is at once problematic, and often as not taken as self-evident. Let us look at a few—of innumerable possible—poetic tributes to flowers, which seem to take Kant's idea as eminently evident. Perhaps the most theoretical, and most Kantian notion, comes from W.H. Auden. He is associating the nine islands which the sailors in Tennyson's Voyage of Maeldune visit, with nine ideas: two concern us here:

The Isle of Flowers Art

The Isle of Fruits Science²

Science unites formal and final causes; art is 'flowers but no fruits': finality is prescinced from. And for Kant art is the reverse of science.

The seventeenth-century German mystic Angelus Silesius wrote:

Die Ros' ist ohn warum sie blühet weil sie blühet.

The Rose has no reason why she blooms because she blooms.³

This notion, very clearly Kantian before Kant, was complicated by Garcia Lorca in the twentieth century:

La rosa
No buscaba ni ciencia ni sombra
confín de carne y sueño
buscaba otra cosa

The rose was not searching for science or darkness borderline of flesh and dreams it was searching for something else 4

If science is end-oriented, and prescinding from ends is a kind of elected-darkness, then is the *otra cosa*, the 'something else', her own beauty, simply? Is it her own beauty isolated, as in a dream, from the structures of the world which the rose seeks? One may be providing a too convenient Kantian reading of Lorca—but it is convenient for our present purposes.

Extremely convenient indeed is a fragment of poetry by Edward Saavedra: it is a little more discursive than the Lorca or the Angelus Silesius:

Lost inside the labyrinth of the rose, I look for meaning, find only beauty

to bloom and fade is the rose's duty but why?—it neither asks nor knows.⁵

This is so Kantian that we might take it as made to order, a bespoke passage.

What we might know from botanising, we must forget, prescind from, in a judgement of the rose as a free beauty. One more quotation from Rilke sums this up:

... c'est un monde qui tourne en rond pour que son calm centre ose le rond repos de la ronde rose.⁶

The whole of the world's teleology is suspended, and the world *dares* to be as perfectly pointless as the rose, to be resolved into its 'rond repose', the perfect circles of Aristotle's cosmology become the softer circlings of the flower.

Kant's prescinding in judgements of beauty both from finality and from knowledge of finality is instanced poetically; and is instanced by what even begins to look like specific reference to Kant, again and again. The object which one judges beautiful has such a prescinding imputed, poetically, to it, itself. This prescinding, then, defines the object, at least for the poet.

The trouble is, as Popperians, we have been taught to distrust the piling-up of confirming instances. What about a disconfirming one?

The genesis of the present paper was an exhibition of Mapplethorpe's Flowers⁷ at the Australian National Gallery Drillhall Annex. I saw Mapplethorpe's flowers as decidedly sexy. The question of course is: are they? Or does Mapplethorpe's reputation nudge one too far towards making one see them so?

Whatever the answer to this question may be, someone who knows Kant's passage about flowers as free beauties can be brought up to a round turn, even if only momently, by Mapplethorpe's flower photographs. I know this, because I was. Should I have been? The answer to this question constitutes most of the rest of this paper, which is less an argument than what Kant might call 'a demonstration, as in anatomy' (C.J., p.210).

... But only with the roses plays;

And them does tell

What color best becomes them, and what smell.

8

The flower is a symbol, oftener than not perhaps, of innocence; or even of a kind of pre-sexual, pre-concupiscent state; so the Blessed Virgin has her rosary, St Joseph his lily, and so on.

Even fruitfulness, which entails generation (if not, among vegetables,

concupiscence) can be linked to innocence. Witness Andrew Marvell in 'The Garden':

What wond'rous life is this I lead! Ripe apples drop about my head; The luscious clusters of the vine Upon my mouth do crush their wine: The nectarine, and curious peach Into my hands themselves do reach; Stumbling on melons, as I pass, Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass. Meanwhile the mind, from pleasure less, Withdraws into its happiness: The mind, that ocean where each kind Does straight its own resemblance find; Yet it creates, transcending these, Far other worlds, and other seas: Annihilating all that's made To a green thought in a green shade.

'Ensnared with flowers' suggests an—innocent—seduction; itself a paradox but:

I fall on grass

and innocence is made sure of in this fall, 'grass' being proleptic of the famous:

Annihilating all that's made
To a green thought in a green shade

'Green' here is not just the usual symbol of hope, but of a kind of blamelessness surely: a lapse into the prelapsarian is the essence of this annihilation. The little fall to the greensward undoes the Fall itself.

But Marvell is the author of a line that Mapplethorpe might be seen to intertext with. In 'To his Coy Mistress', which begins 'Had we but world enough, and time, This coyness, lady, were no crime', Marvell writes:

My vegetable love should grow Vaster than empires and more slow.9

The Marvell poem 'To his Coy Mistress' is an urging to some kind of congress not as 'innocent' as that of vegetables, and no bees are indicated as go-betweens, unless the poem itself is that bee. Reading Marvell's 'To his Coy Mistress' one is reminded of Bernini's *Daphne* caught in the very moment of her beginning to become a tree. Desire is about to be frozen—into botany?

Mapplethorpe's plate 15 in *Some Women by Mapplethorpe* makes the equivocal use of 'vegetable' for *love* into a visual pun. But there is no innocence

in Mapplethorpe. Marvell's poem might be provoking the cold refusal of Mapplethorpe's plate 12; innocence here is in doubt, on both sides. Is this pose a refusal, or the contrary, a prompting?

Both Joan Didion in her preface to Some Women by Mapplethorpe and Bruce Chatwin in his to Lady: Lisa Lyon¹¹ remark that, with his camera, Mapplethorpe does the same to flowers as to women. Didion writes:

One question: If Robert Mapplethorpe's 'subjects' here are women, what then is his subject?

And she goes on:

His subject is the same as it was when his 'subjects' were the men in leather, or the flowers ...

Read in text and context, Didion's 'subject' is not intended as a neutral pointer—as in a noncommittal caption—but, as it were, as 'subjection', and that as in 'the sexual dreams of imperial England'. There is a colonization of the subject, and a perverse one at that, which she comments on with due asperity. The same asperity is there in the description which a woman painter friend of mine used of Mapplethorpe, 'a gay fascist'. Mapplethorpe gives his subjects a curious rigidity and elegance. And one recalls the—dangerous—elegance of the fascist poses and uniforms. Elegance there was a function, as ever, of power. In his lens' eye, the power is his, to pose, and to fascinate.

Chatwin writes in his preface to Lady: Lisa Lyon:

[Mapplethorpe's] portraits of flowers are somehow inter-changeable with his portraits of society women.¹²

But it is not at all as clear a case as the society-portrait might be. Chatwin had already written,

At the behest of her doting master, he [Mapplethorpe] got a street mongrel to pose as if she were Pauline Borghese by Canova.

'Street mongrel' is less elegant than the equivocal cool of Canova's neo-Classical sculpture. But one recalls Starobinski's remark about neo-Classical art:

The art of the period frequently represented psyche as the soul; but what it really depicted was adolescent nakedness offered up to a desire that was not of the soul.¹³

We have wandered a little from our topic? Flowers have a sex life, but no awareness, no concupiscence, and as far as we know, none of the kind of awareness that would be a precondition of desire or of concupiscence. Flowers have no souls, or only vegetable ones.

What happens when one sees a Mapplethorpe flower photograph is a transfer of affect. His reputation is such, or the power of his images is such, that we project our sexual desire on to things which themselves have no desire. That is, we run counter to Kant's intentions with respect to our taking flowers as 'free beauties' in at least two ways:

We (i) advert to their function, (ii) to their function specifically as sexual apparatus. And this is botanical knowledge, a suppression of which at least seems for Kant to be a precondition for taking flowers as free beauties. Neither function in general may be thought of in a pulchritudo vaga context, nor a fortiori any specific function. To transfer our affect/concupiscence about sex to flowers is to heap perversity upon logical and epistemological impropriety, at least as Kant conceives the structure of the Aesthetic.

This perversity, is, however, common.

If flowers have no courtships, nevertheless we use them in ours. Here is a description of a character in David Malouf's *The Great World* going to visit the woman who becomes his lifelong mistress:

He was very conscious of the fact that at twenty-five he was entirely without experience in some matters. Courtship and that—the sort of gallantry that some fellows can manage by instinct, he had none of. But he had a great tenderness in him. Surely if he let that speak it would be enough.

Still, he had armed himself, just in case, with a bunch of flowers, purple and red anemones wrapped in pale tissue. The old girl he bought them from, who looked after six or seven buckets in a laneway, and sat reading the Bible all day on a folding stool, had recommended them as the freshest at this time of the week, and seeing how nervous he was had taken trouble with the wrapping. The flower heads with their strong colours and black furry centres, as if fat bumblebees were at them, just peeped out over the sky-blue tissue, and there was a bit of ribbon, a darker blue.¹⁴

A little old-fashioned practical criticism could unpack a nest of ambiguities, paradoxes and inversions here—but the general thrust is obvious enough. Eric Gill, typographer, philosopher, artist and sexual athlete went well beyond this, writing in a love letter:

What are those lovely creatures which we delight to fill our gardens with and to display on our tables? What are they indeed but the sex organs of the plants they adom. So that it is neither fantastic nor even an exaggeration to say that while from one point of view the country hedgerow is filled with savage creatures armed to the teeth—with poison and thorns and spikes and every sort of offensive and defensive weapon (in this respect perfect models for all modern nations), so from another, it is nothing but an uproarious exhibition of desire for fruitfulness and multiplication. And having thus become enlightened as to the nature of the flowers in the field, does one then

turn round and say: Ohell! what a filthy world it is? I can't imagine that such would be the result. Rather, it seems to me, we should turn round on all our previous pruderies and think of ourselves as being adorned, as indeed we are, with precious ornaments. And thus a great burden of puzzlement is taken from the mind. And, what is more to the point; a great wave of cheerfulness breaks over us, and of confidence and that is to say confidingness.¹⁵

Gill was always a special pleader, and this plea falls gratefully on the ear only of those who are not troubled by concupiscence in relation to human sexual function. It falls gratefully on the ear of those only who can be nudists, both outside and in. Such innocence! It was lost with the Fall. And one is reminded of Kant, who wrote in another context: 'Innocence is a splendid thing, but cannot well maintain itself'. A piece of post-Lapsarian common sense this is!

Contemplating the project of the paper, and looking at flowers and at pictures of them, I was tempted to make—à propos Gill and Mapplethorpe—a pun on the name of the punk-rock band 'The Sex Pistols/Pistils': but, brushing up an always-imperfect acquaintance with botany, I found that pistils, unlike pistols are female, and so not phallic at all.

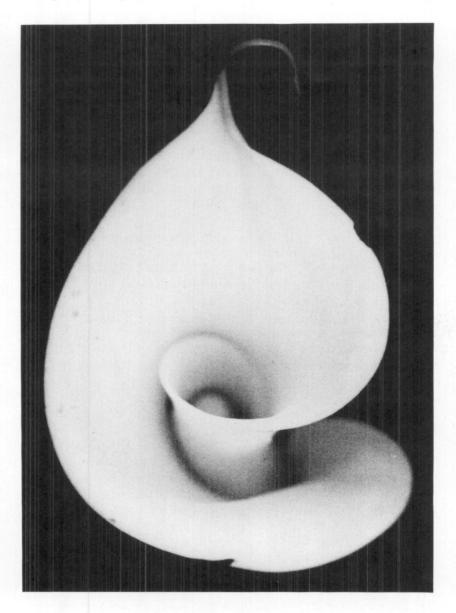
The phallic flower is all-over, however, botany or no botany: one may cite a recent Hestia bra advertisement with a phallic flower as its sub-text, up on billboards in Melbourne.

Flowers can be phallic or vaginal. And they are often taken to be the latter by some when it is a matter of Georgia O'Keefe's flower-pictures. O'Keefe in a TV interview on United States Public Broadcasting said of people who saw her flowers as sexual symbols: 'They were talking about themselves, not about me'.

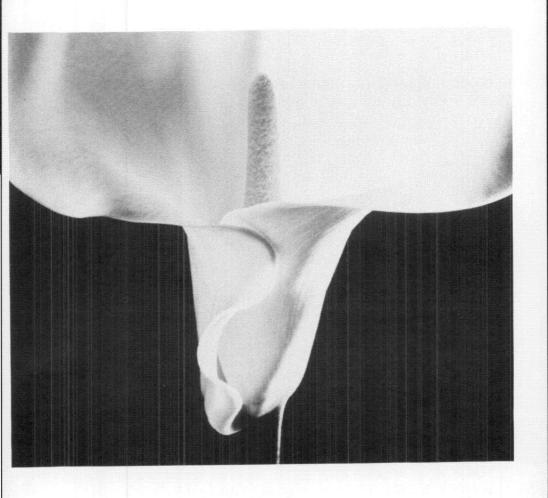
This assorts less than well with the title of a recent book of photographs of flowers published in Australia by Lariane Fonseca, If Passion were a Flower. 17 It is not one. But we impute our passions by metonymy and metaphor to passionless entities. Entities which, properly to be read as free beauties, must be seen not as merely non-concupiscent (because that question cannot arise for them) but, as it were, as totally non-functional, and this with regard to their own function as sexual parts of plants.

Kant is, as it were, an ultimate Puritan. And he is cooler than the coolest neo-Classicism of his time, that reworking of a Greek idealization which adverts, willy nilly, to final as much as to formal causes. A beautiful flower is for Kant, not as it might be for Sir Joshua Reynolds, a realised central-form, a fine example of its sort, and so, beautiful. It is, just, beautiful, for Kant: as form-without-telos. Kant writes, early on in the third critique:

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics



Robert Mapplethorpe



Lariane Fonseca, If Passion were a Flower

By [a critique of aesthetic judgement] is meant the faculty of estimating formal finality (otherwise called subjective), by the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, by [a critique of teleological judgement is meant] the estimating the real finality (objective) of nature by understanding and reason. (C. J., p.34, italic added.)

Here would seem to lie the germ of art-for-art's-sake, or of flowers as functionless-forms-for-fancy's-fascination.

A free beauty is free for Kant with respect to its own ends, and bound only to a special human end: contemplation. It is bound to the 'end' of the inducing of a free play of the cognitive faculties in what is—essentially—a mere cognition, or, even, a less-than-cognition. Roger Fry sums up Kant's point more sharply, perhaps, than Kant himself. He writes:

Biologically speaking, art is a blasphemy. We were given eyes to see things, not to look at them.

and the distinction between seeing and looking is of the essence. Fry goes on:

Life takes care that we all learn the lesson thoroughly, so that at a very early age we have acquired a very considerable ignorance of visual appearances. We have learned the meaning-for-life of appearances so well that we understand them, as it were in shorthand. The subtlest differences of appearance that have utility-value continue to be appreciated, while large and important visual characters, provided they are useless for life, will pass unnoticed.¹⁸

The flower does not know its own use: it just has it. If we are to know a flower aesthetically, then we must be as unknowing as it is. Formal cause must be severed from final: and a new, aesthetic finality must be made to supervene on the old biological one. Flowers are not for fruiting, they are there to induce 'the free play of the cognitive faculties' in what is, almost, a re-recognition which is no-cognition: a look, without even the ulterior motive of what is looked at, itself. A motive built in to the thing itself, which asthetic vision must excise. Form and telos must be sundered.

Aesthetically, it might seem that the innocent pleasures of botanising are not innocent enough for the aesthetic. For the knowing person, a flower-show can turn into, if not an orgy quite, at least something which loses the precise freedom of the aesthetic, which is: to be above and beyond function. The aesthetic is beyond not only the functions imputed by metaphor or metonymy, but above those implicit or immanent in the aesthetic object itself as a mere thing in the world.

The botanist, to the aesthetician, can seem as perverse as Mapplethorpe? Or, as perverse, at a slightly more elevated level of perversity?

The mind that ocean where each kind

Does straight is own resemblance find ...

Knowledge in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is suspect: in the third chapter of Genesis Adam and Eve fall—the occasion of the Fall is disobedience, and an apple. One recalls Milton's opening chiasmus in *Paradise Lost*:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste Brought death into the world ...

where the 'fruit' is the serpent's apple, as well as the consequence of the disobedience; and the fruit is death.

But in Genesis, what tempted Adam and Eve was knowledge—knowledge of good and evil—and the first consequence of the Fall/The Knowledge, was concupiscence—known for the first time. And the concupiscence was known as and in a consciousness of their nakedness. For without concupiscence nakedness would be unremarkable.

From Aristotle to Kant, knowledge in the 'scientific' sense had been knowledge by causes, and Aristotle reckoned there to be four of these, telos being not the least interesting. After Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' the basis of knowledge moved 'in', 'in' to the subject, and into a peculiar kind of connaturality between the structuring, transcendental-ego and the appearances which it structures.

What is crucial, however, for the aesthetic is that part of an object's structure, that is, the nexus between form and *telos*, must be put aside; and form alone and its congeniality with the mind must be attended to. This is an odd kind of connaturality of taking of a form as, aesthetically, good when in the case in question the thing must be taken as good-for-nothing, since nothing that it is good for may be taken into account.¹⁹ Perhaps it is a matter merely of suspending the practical in favour of the contemplative?

And, again, if the suspension of utility is the point, the metapoint may be that metaphor is being made way for—metaphor, with its metonymies, and even, possibly, its perversions? It may be that real botany is unaesthetic, but Marvell's playful 'vegetable love' is perfectly proper.

Aesthetic contemplation, in the Kantian sense, is only, perhaps, a meta-connaturality, a reflexion not upon structure but on the inexorability of the structuring, when this is considered in a privileged, aesthetic example. And there is Kant's long 'Critique of Teleology' to be considered before we can be quite sure of the basis of his preference for pulchritudo vaga with its prescension from final causes, over pulchritudo adhaerens which manifests form as a function of function. All this needs to be gone into—though it will not be done in this paper, which is itself a shade more 'aesthetic' than it is argumentative.

Here I am offering only a suggestion, something less than an argument, that inter-texting Kant on flowers and on *pulchritudo vaga* with Genesis we may have hit upon an unconscious motive for Kant's aesthetic purism—his aesthetic Puritanism.

Mapplethorpes's flowers, or our psychological sets in reading them, raise issues of the flowers' final causes, in the first place, and invite perverse projection in the second. And à propos Mapplethorpe's perversity, or ours in reading him as we do, an interesting further issue presents itself: is Duchamp's *Bride* even more curious again than a Mapplethorpe photograph of a rose, by a whole order of magnitude, because it ascribes carnality to the metallic and purely mechanical? Had Duchamp already trumped Mapplethorpe's flowers? And bettered a perversity in so doing?

Kant's requiring us to prescind from flowers' final causes suggests that, for Kant in his aesthetic, knowledge, knowledge by causes, is as infected as knowledge is in Genesis: with knowledge comes concupiscence. The aesthetic flees this concupiscence.

By our not adverting to what a thing is for we—and it—achieve a kind of ontological innocence which is a prophylactic against concupiscence. If we do not know what a thing is for, then we cannot—consciously at least—misuse it. What has no use cannot have a misuse. The aesthetic is more pure than Pure Practical Reason could ever be. Though it must be recalled that what matters for Kant in moral philosophy, is not an act's actual or presumed consequences, but its bare form, that is, its passing the universalizability test.

Taken with the connaturality point, this suggestion, that the final cause is somehow not to be thought of in the aesthetic, shows us a motive even behind Kant's argument: the argument turns on a nexus between a special kind of connaturality and a mistrusting of, traditional, teleologies. The motive married—if we may use this term here—to the argument, shows a deep sense of the dangers of knowledge to be present, perhaps, in Kant's thought. Rationalism is totally put aside in the aesthetic.

It is Genesis—and the Bible generally—which conflates mere knowledge and carnal knowledge in a set of puns which—because of the Bible—have entered our culture at very deep levels indeed.

Marvell, himself a Puritan, knew all about the ambiguity and multi-valency of flowers and fruit: Kant, a more philosophical purist, produces an aesthetic whose essence is a prescinding from one element in the knowledge of a thing contemplated, viz. its end; and a prescinding from the relation of this end to the thing's form. Form alone, Kant insists, should interest us aesthetically. We should be, at once, disinterested with respect to the aesthetic object, and uninterested in any telos it might have, even if the Aristotelian in us cannot fathom mere form, without respect to finality as telos.

To put it all another way, and to conclude: if we are perverse and dirtyminded in our readings of flower-photographs by Mapplethorpe, then both the Bible and Kant have been there well before us. And this is the case even if their aim has been prevention; and 'prevention' in both the ordinary and the Prayer Book senses.

Or, to be very short about it: fig-leaves indeed!

Or, one might close with the description of a plant which seems, almost, to have read and noted Kant. I quote from a short piece in *The Age* on an orchid from south-eastern Queensland, called *Dendrobium speciosum*. It is pollinated exclusively by native bees, but:

For their efforts, the bees get nothing. Over time, this *Dendrobium* species has developed a glamorous but, from a bee's view-point, useless attractant. Its flowers look and smell enticing, but produce no nectar for the bees ...

The flowers of *D. speciosum* use no special ploy to attract pollinators, such as mimicking other flowers or posing as a female insect to attract a male suitor and pollinator. They rely solely on their stunning visual appeal.²⁰

We have, in Queensland, the freest of Kant's *free beauties*? The note on these orchids begins with a quotation from Oscar Wilde, 'The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it, intensely'.

Even evolution can be aesthetic—at least sometimes. Aesthetically, all that flowers do is—flower.

Notes

- 1 Immanuel Kant, 'Book I, Analytic of the Beautiful: Third moment', in The Critique of Judgement, trans. J.C. Meredith, Oxford, 1928, p.80. References to this translation are given in the text.
- 2 W.H. Auden, The Enchaféd Flood, London, 1951, p.29.
- 3 True Redd, La Rose: an intimacy of roses, Telluride, Colorado, 1989, p. 36. Coming, by pure serendipity, on this book one could not but be struck by the number of 'Kantian' examples which it contains.
- 4 Redd, p.47.
- 5 Redd, p.89.
- 6 Redd, p.79.
- 7 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Flowers*, foreword by Patti Smith, Boston/London, 1988. When given as a lecture in October 1993, this paper was illustrated with some twenty flower slides from this book.
- 8 Andrew Marvell, 'The Picture of Little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers', Complete Poems, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno, Penguin, 1972, p.63.
- 9 Quotations from Marvell from *The Complete Poems*, pp.100, 50.
- 10 Some Women by Mapplethorpe, intro. Joan Didion, London, 1989. The paper was

- illustrated by a few slides from this book.
- 11 Lady: Lisa Lyon, text by Bruce Chatwin, Viking/Penguin, USA, 1980. Some slides from this were used.
- 12 Chatwin, pp.9-10.
- 13 Jean Starobinski, 1789, The Emblems of Reason, trans. Barbara Bray, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1982, p.180. Starobinski remarks on Canova's 'victory over desire' that, 'He is not known to have had any love affairs, or indulged in any passions...', p.161.
- 14 David Malouf, The Great World, Macmillan, Australia, 1991, p.184.
- 15 Fiona MacCarthy, Eric Gill: a Lover's Quest for Art and God, New York, 1989, p.290. The recipient of the letter is shown in a Gill wood-engraving, plate 58, after Twenty-five Nudes, 1937, in a pose like that of Bernini's Daphne: but she is not becoming a tree.
- 16 Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. H.J. Paton, London, 1948, p.22.
- 17 If Passion were a Flower, Lariane Fonseca et al., Spinifex Press, 1992. The paper was illustrated with some ten slides from this book. O'Keefe's disavowal might usefully be inter-texted with photographs in this work.
- 18 'The Artistic Vision', in Vision and Design, London, 1957, p.47.
- 19 See, Xenaphon Memorabilia of Socrates, ch. VIII, 1 4.
- 20 Tom Entwistle, Orchid Welshes, in The Age, Monday 24 July, 1989, p.16.