The following fragments belong to a work in progress on the epistemological value of flowers, conceived as a historical inquiry into their multiple range of significance in systems of knowledge and systems of belief, human practice and arts. One may justly ask: why flowers? First of all the topic is in the air, as scientific research, works of fiction, photography and visual arts manifest a renewed interest in the properties of flowers and their symbols: a consequence of thinking green which is changing political attitudes, behavior patterns and cultural approaches. In a stimulating book entitled *The Key of Green: Passions and Perception in Renaissance Culture* (1), Bruce R. Smith proves that thinking green is not only referred to present and future, but can be used to understand the past. Flowers serve well such a purpose, as they have a long history of interaction with the human. From a biological viewpoint they are the reproduction organs of plants and were attested as such in empirical science since the first botanical taxonomies of antiquity, but the human agents have domesticated many of the wild flowers and have used both the wild and the cultivated for a variety of purposes that divert flowers from accomplishing their biological role. Thus they can serve as nourishment, healing remedies, poisons, drugs, sources of color and perfume, objects of decoration, of worship, totems, messengers to other humans and to the divine. Beyond the immediate experience with flowers, humans have integrated their names or images in meaning constructs, making them participants in art objects, poetic discourses, religious narratives, ethics, language expressions. A noteworthy function of flowers is that of replacing language in communication, either by their simple evocative presence, or in artificial idioms based on conveying a specific meaning to each type of flower.

Furthermore, flowers can give an insight into the faculties re-awakened with the contemporary return to nature: emotions, intuitions, imagination, aesthetic sensibility, which are being reconsidered by philosophy itself. In Europe, a historian of philosophy like W. Schmidt-Biggemann defines the pious imagination as the necessary condition to understand the history of western spirituality(2). In America, Tamar Szabó Gendler's work *Intuition, Imagination & Philosophical Methodology* convincingly addresses the role of intuition and imagination in the scenarios both philosophy and science work with(3). Moreover, if half a century ago philosophy was defined as "the actual guardian of reason" (*die eigentliche Verwalterin der Ratio*) by Heidegger, – who consequently rejected affections and emotions as irrational (4), – a restitution of the epistemological value of love was initiated two decades ago by Martha Nussbaum(5). Against this background, flowers can become a vehicle for engaging in a reflection on our connection to nature and the nature of thought. In the context of the contemporary urge to re-think, re-imagine, re-assess, which has turned critical instruments and terminology fluctuant, it seems more appropriate to follow the model of the *Problemdenker,* formulating questions, rather than providing final answers.

Flowers and thought

How do we think *with* flowers? One can think *about* flowers, turning them into objects of study or meditation, but how is thinking *with* flowers to be understood? Thinking *with* can spell out as making flowers instrumental to thought by taking them as analogs of human or divine nature, as well as thinking along or together with flowers by exerting emotional empathy and expanding the perception of the world through imagination. Is thinking with or along with flowers a universal feature? In today's ongoing process of globalization, when images, patterns of thought and flowers themselves circulate at great speed, one is tempted to say 'yes', but in a historical perspective, it looks like there were areas in the world where flowers were silent. In his volume *The Culture of Flowers*, J. Goody informs that in large parts of traditional Black Africa flowers were not sacrificed for aesthetic or religious purposes, consequently there was no flower culture and flower symbolism and "it was animals and men that carried semantic meaning"(6). Later on Christianity and Islamism introduced the culture of flowers to Africa. The rules for becoming a good Gbebo Christian in Liberia are significant in this respect, for he "observed Sunday, pulled down greegrees (charms of 'fetiches'), and refused to participate in traditional sacrifices, but.... also wore western clothes, built a western house, married only one wife, and cultivated a garden of flowers"(7). This is an example of how transforming the environment was meant to run parallel to the assimilation of the entire metaphorical construction of Christian mythology from the terrestrial paradise to the promise of human flourish in the theology of salvation. The garden of flowers was a support for the new faith and the expansion of imagination which came with it.

In the realm of imagination, not only do we think together with flowers, but communicate with them in a perfectly understandable way. To the reader of English literature this may evoke Tennyson's poetic conversation with flowers in *Maud* (Part I, XXII, 1855) or *The Garden of Live Flowers* in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), where Alice finds out from the Tiger-lily that flowers "can talk...when there's anybody worth talking to"(8). She also becomes aware that they emit critical judgements on each other and on an occasional visitor like herself: the Rose thinks Alice's face "has got some sense in it, though it's not a clever one!"(9), but admits her being 'the right color', while the Tiger-lily is more tempted to accept her, for "if only her petals curled up a little more, she'd be all right"(10). In a traditional interpretation the Rose and the Violet could be Alice Liddell's sisters disguised as flowers (11) and the Tiger-lily a camouflaged Victorian lady expressing her opinions on a stranger. The episode is also regarded as Carroll's ironical hint at the over-proliferation of the flower culture in the Victorian age.

Today the same passage can be viewed as an anticipation of the scientific claim that every organism, even the simplest one, weighs critically the stimuli and the possibilities of response, in other words, that each form of life manifests a *sui generis* type of categorization dictated by survival necessities and explicit in its reactions. So if we assume that we can think along with flowers, this presupposes that flowers "think". Indeed, botanical and genetic studies have published evidence that plants have forms of memory and intelligence that make them knowledgeable participants in their immediate environment and in cosmic cycles. Far from reacting in a linear way to stimuli, plants enact a sophisticated system of perceiving the world and adapting to it: they have an internal clock, are aware of and respond to moon phases (12), have developed visual, thermic or olfactive 'tricks' to attract pollinators (13). They seem to 'guess' the intention of an animal or a human approaching them and warn each other against danger. One can thus deduce that flowers not only elaborate signals from the environment in a way that could be considered their specific type of thinking, but they also communicate, sending messages to acknowledged or possible receivers with a precise intentionality. Aristotle's scale of being which placed plants on the lowest level and ascribed them an irrational soul manifesting itself through nutrition and growth does not hold in today's scientific terms. Rather we can say that humans and flowers co-participate in the world's self-awareness and the immediate sequel of this apprehension is the redefinition of thought.

The challenge of ecology

In its attempt to 'put brain, body and world together again' (14), ecological thinking, amenable to Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* (15) conceives culture and nature as parts of one dynamic holistic system, in which human and non-human persons exchange information and energy. The epistemological consequence of this approach is that "mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system and not reducible to the workings of the human brain; cognitive processes are external to human brains as much as they are internal … ," according to the Finnish philosopher Vesa-Pekka Herva who applies the lesson of ecology in an essay entitled: *Flower-lovers, after all? Rethinking Religion and Human-Environment Relations in Minoan Crete* (16). The author reinterprets the flower symbolism in Minoan Crete as an example of ecological thinking without recurring to traditional notions like myth or animism. This approach is on one side an extension of the concept of thought and on the other, a reduction. As an extension it grants every living being a status of dignity, by assuming its participation in self-awareness and world-awareness, conceived as a scale starting from the elementary level of simple organisms and reaching its epitome in the human being. As consciousness is embodied and intrinsic in life forms, human consciousness is no longer co-natural

with a source of rationality and self-awareness beyond and above itself, but shares the biological foundation of the simplest organisms. Rather than anthropocentric, the world turns bio-centric, celebrating life in all its forms. The paradoxical aspect of this way of rethinking human nature and the nature of consciousness is that it stems from the scientific results of the most technological civilization that has ever existed on earth and which has developed precisely because it wanted to supersede man's natural limitations. So, in an ecological perspective, humans are close to the non-human persons endowed with self-and world awareness because of their biological status, but defining thought as processing information and responding to it reduces the phenomenology of human cognition to a schematic stimulus-reaction line, which undermines the hierarchy of intelligence that biology itself defends. The ultimate scientific explanation of consciousness, understood as self-awareness and awareness of the environment is a series of physico-chemical processes. As final account of *calculative thinking*, to use Heidegger's meaning of the concept in *Gelassenheit* (17) it is problematic: conceiving the reality of thought in physico-chemical data presents itself as an objective answer to the question of truth, while it is an expression of the present-day structure of human knowledge reached through scientific instruments. As a satisfactory answer about the foundation of thought it invites to thoughtlessness, as Heidegger warned in the above mentioned text (18), turning the *meditative thinking*, *das besinnliche Denken*, that "contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is"(19), futile. Moving away from the horizon of mystery, calculative thinking dissolves the sense of wonder, *das Erstaunen* Heidegger speaks about in *Was ist das – die Philosophie?*, which is not only the principle of philosophy itself (20), but also the ferment of human creativity.

Assuming that 'mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system' implies that thought is no longer necessarily co-natural with language. For the human subject this is a gain and a loss. It is a gain as it allows us to claim that we think the world in as many ways as we experience it, which means that every perception, intuition, sensation, emotion, movement, gesture that is present to consciousness contributes to extend thinking beyond the left brain hemisphere and this is a restoration of human integrity. On the other hand it is a loss as it tends to call language any code or modality of signaling specific to the environment system, which by implication deprives language of its creative power and its historical dimension. Bringing nature and culture on the same level tends to diminish the human agent's rootedness in cultural history by exalting the defining properties of genetic memory, which threatens the understanding of human integrity and does not correspond to reality. For, taking flowers as an example, they are never experienced in the historical-vacuum of a laboratory, but always in a social context which involves the intermediation of language. Words convey to the individual the historically accumulated knowledge about flowers, warning for instance

against the toxic properties of some, and informing about the uses and meanings of flowers in the social and religious rituals of the respective community.

Interestingly enough, the claim that cognitive processes are external to human brain as much as they are internal suits the literal extension of human thought in technology and places nature and technology on analogous positions, even if technology is the product of human brain, while nature is not, rather the human brain is the outcome of a natural evolutionary process. Further, how far can we de-centralize our human-grounded world picture by accepting that mind and agency are properties of the entire human-environment system? The deepened awareness of belonging to a natural order and sharing its processuality with the simplest manifestations of life, does not annul the human person's realization of his or her difference, capacity to create culture, use language and dominate to a certain extent nature itself. Treating the entities of the environment as non-human persons means changing their status from objects into interlocutors of the human subjects, which is what the poetic imagination has always done by what is simply called personification in any basic list of figures of speech, which are ultimately figures of thought. This is what Lewis Carroll imagined in the *Garden of the Live Flowers*, assuming that Alice Liddell, his addressee, would take it for granted as any child would do, or more recently what James Cameron proposed in the science fiction film *Avatar*. It is fascinating to see how a science based definition of thought contests philosophical tenets on one hand and confirms poetic intuitions on the other.

Metaphors and flowers

An influential theory derived from articulating ecology to cognitive science and linguistics in a phenomenological perspective has been proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson for some decades now. Mainly exposed in *Metaphors We Live By* and *Philosophy in the Flesh* (21) their theory acknowledges Merleau-Ponty as a precursor and is human-centered and language-aware. Setting out from the ecological premise that reason "is not an essence that separates us from other animals; rather it places us on a continuum with them"(22), Lakoff and Johnson explore the modalities of cognition offered by metaphors and their prevalence in our interaction with the environment. According to them "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of things in terms of another"(23). Metaphors are "conceptual in nature" and "are among our principal vehicles for understanding"(24). In *Philosophy in the Flesh* they bring evidence that the rise of metaphors corresponds to the formation of neural structures by conflation of brain areas. The cognitive scale

starts with the sensorimotor inference, which offers the basis for conceptual inference. Since many of the subjective experiences are conceptualized as metaphors, one can distinguish between: primary metaphors that have a minimal 'atomic' structure and arise "naturally, automatically, and unconsciously through everyday experience by means of conflation, during which cross-domain associations are formed"(25) and complex metaphors that are 'molecular' and result from conceptual blending, co-activating primary metaphors domains. A large part of these metaphors are conventional, shared and fixed in language patterns. They are "used to reason with"(26), while concepts are structured by multiple metaphors (27). A powerful statement is that we ignore great part of our neural activity, recognized now as the *cognitive unconscious.* In line with cognitive science discoveries, the authors claim that reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged and that spiritual experiences, embodied as any other mental state, are the outcome of the imaginative empathic projection, which is a form of "transcendence" and represents "a vital cognitive faculty"(28).

By turning the metaphor into the ground of meaning constitution in common understanding and communication, poetry, rhetoric, science and philosophy, Lakoff and Johnson offer a basis to bring together sciences and humanities and simultaneously take a step towards the de-hellenization of Western culture, understood as a departure from its traditional categories established by classical thought. They openly challenge the philosophical tradition of the West, its Greek roots included, classifying transcendental reason, the dichotomy of body and soul, the doctrine of forms, the classical correspondence theory of truth and God as metaphors. The old query of whether human knowledge is shaped to reality or whether the judgement conditions its understanding evaporates once one postulates the biological and contextual factors as determining the way we think: the two processes are no longer mutually exclusive, but complementary and concatenated.

The issue is obviously the hierarchy of knowledge, which Lakoff and Johnson redefine by asserting the scientifically proven embodiedness of knowledge as truth and reformulating the goals of philosophy in a way that is surprisingly congenial to Nietzsche (who is not a reference in *Philosophy in the Flesh)*: "Philosophers are not simply logic-choppers who fine-tune what their culture already knows in its bones. Instead, they are the poets of systematic thought. Philosophy at its best is creative and synthetic. It helps us put our world together in a way that makes sense to us and that helps us deal with the problems that confront us in our lives. When philosophers do this well they are using our ordinary conceptual resources in very extraordinary ways"(29). The consequence of this view of philosophy is an anthropology which defines humans as philosophical animals(30), since "much of

everyday metaphysics arises from metaphor"(31) and metaphors are seminal in our life choices and in our categorization of truth(32). Assimilating metaphor to epistemology comes close to Heidegger's interpretation of man as a *meditative being* (33), and saves the creative dimension of the human agent and his participation in wonder.

Lakoff and Jonson's democratic conception of philosophy and philosophizing entitles flowers to become a philosophical issue, as they have contributed to enrich human experience and thought and have stimulated metaphors that encompass essential questions concerning the sense of life. Flowers are present at all levels of thought as addressed in *Philosophy in the Flesh*: they intervene in the sensorimotor experience, are the substance of primary and complex metaphors, are connected to human emotions and used as a medium in spiritual experiences. One wonders actually why professional philosophers reflecting on the processes involved in consciousness prefer inanimate objects for examples. And yet, the phenomenality and properties of flowers convey the prerogatives of an embodied philosophy, – embodied in the "flesh of the world" -, waiting for the human subject to grasp their patterns and the dormant metaphors of their sensuousness, fertility, transience and beauty.

How did flowers shape man's self-knowledge and knowledge of the world?

There are two ways in which flowers influence human thought: as natural beings and as parts of human culture. As natural beings they become input of thought by passing through human senses, the place of encounter between the "flesh of the world" and the human flesh. Flowers impact sight, touch, smell and taste. Hearing seems to be excluded, as humans are not able to perceive the sounds flowers produce in their growth, in their undulating in the wind, or in their withering, but their silence to human ears has not been deprived of significance. Their voiceless explosion of beauty increases the sense of wonder at natural creativity, while their silent decay embarrasses the human loud cry against old age and death. However as shown previously, experiencing flowers is always accompanied by a language-conveyed field of significance that belongs to the person's background and translates the historically stratified experience with them. Experiencing flowers as natural realities intersects with living them as cultural presence. Besides, any of the properties of flowers known through the senses is interactional, to use Lakoff and Johnson's concept, as "they make sense only relative to human functioning"(34).

The first striking property of flowers is color, which has undoubtedly refined the human capacity to think pictorially, that is in color combinations. Colors provoke different emotions, moods and states of mind and they have contributed to conceive beauty as predicating on color harmony and color expression. There are many other parts of nature beautifully colored; but it is impossible to touch the color of the dawn with the rosy fingers, evoked by Homer, or to preserve in some form, apart from its subjective rendering in art, the blue of the sky or sea, which do not actually have color, while flowers are within everybody's reach and can be used and perceived in complex ways that include other senses than sight. Thanks to flowers it is possible to touch, smell or taste yellow, crimson, blue, pink, violet, white, which opens a discourse on synesthesia as both a biological and an aesthetic phenomenon actualized in cross-sensory metaphors.

The flower corollas have offered human thought examples of embodied symmetry, numbers and geometrical proportions, showing that structures are not human constructs, but intrinsic to nature. The patterning of their shapes suggests a cosmic rationality, an author of the natural designs, identified with transcendent forces or personified Nature. The flowers' specific petal numbers have contributed to classify them in botany, but they also confirm thinking that number is the key of the universe. By numeric extension Hinduism conceived the thousand-petal lotus as the symbol of purity of the heart and mind and chose it to represent the Sahasrara chakra, the place of encounter with the higher consciousness. The spiral growth patterns of some flowers have given rise to speculations on the golden section and the Fibonacci numbers. In our time, the vegetal designs distinguishable with the eye or the microscope have become the bio-inspiration for the algorithm-based avant-garde art and architecture. Number and proportion discernible in these diminutive elements of our environment, reinforced the idea of a cosmic harmony reverberating down to the humblest parts of nature, and there is no coincidence that in the European culture, the Renaissance is the moment with the richest flower-symbolism and the conception of beauty as proportion and concord of parts emanating from one source, God the artist.

The petal texture has contributed to refine human touch and think softness, delicacy, fragility, associating these qualities to human subjects, mostly to young age and women. Petal skin and women's skin have a long tradition of overlapping symbolism of sensuousness with the implicit allusions to love and procreation. Roses have been linked to Venus and in a Christian context to Mary. This passage of symbols was possible because to the human observer the fertility of flowers aided by visitation of bees and butterflies, keeps them in an unaltered state of purity. Further elaborations of the analogy between flowers and female sexuality in a Christian context have produced the concept

of deflowering, from the Old French *desflorer,* which meant initially to strip a garden of flowers, hence an implied violence on the integrity of beauty. The metaphor discloses the paradoxical relationship with nature in Christianity, for plucking a flower means not allowing it to participate in the world's fertility, while a young girl being deflowered becomes a potentially fertile woman. An extreme outcome of this paradox resounds in Baudelaire's *malaise* expressed by his *Flowers of Evil*, a metaphor for his vitiated relationship to nature, his home and his mother, and the nostalgia of paradise transformed into adulterated agonizing encounters with women experienced as poisonous flowers.

The enduring numerical and geometrical patterns stamped in the petals' frail flesh has inspired by analogy ideas about the paradox of human nature, bound to search for a permanent underlying order of things and limited by an ephemeral, vulnerable body. Actually humans transcend their limited existence as flowers do: by procreation or by creativity which enables them to expand contingency into the future through momentary statements of beauty or intellectual insight. No coincidence that the collections of literary, philosophical or theological works are called anthologies, from the ancient Greek *anthologia* (flower-gathering) or *florilegia* in Latin and that they were crucial to the process of knowledge transmission, that is of cultural survival.

The priority of relations over things and of process over form advocated by ecology can be convincingly illustrated by flowers, for with them transience and perpetuity can be thought simultaneously, as well as the connection between present and future, since their sacrifice means the continuity of vegetation. Their dying away to bear fruit is fundamental for life on earth, but has also suggested the sacrifice of youth in the human world for the sake of utility and survival. In *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms and Nationalisms* (35), Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney analyzes the metamorphose of the cherry blossoms symbolism along Japanese history, before they were 'militarized' and became an emblem of kamikaze missions in the Second World War. The efficiency of this propaganda controlled analogy relied on the deeply rooted cultural habit of identification with the cherry blossoms, on their at once vague and permutable field of significance, typical of metaphors, but also on the lightness of the flower sacrifice in nature, a quiet performance deprived of blood-shedding pathos. The cherry blossoms example discloses the participation of flower symbolism in systems of power or in power confrontations. Flowers have been used as totems or emblems of power in many cultural areas, for instance the fleur-de-lis or the rose in Europe, the chrysanthemum in Japan. In more recent times, the peaceful, life preserving flower power tried to shut down guns and the war policy behind them in what is called the counterculture of the 1960s in the USA and the United Kingdom.

Some flowers are sweet and edible, others have drugging or toxic properties. This may have induced thoughts about the insidious duality of beauty, whose charm can prove harmful or fatal and about the good-evil dichotomy as inherent in nature and by analogy in human nature, as in the famous monologue of Friar Lawrence in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (act II, scene 3). Reflections on moral innocence and moral corruption by political order find one of their most intense expressions in the flower metaphors of *Li sao* ("On Encountering Trouble"), the famous writing attributed to the ancient Chinese poet Qu Yuan (340–278 BCE)(36).

Thanks to flowers mankind has discovered the delight or intoxication of pleasant scents. The extraction of essences from their petals has changed our sense of smell. Today the association of their fragrances to sensuousness is dominant, but in ancient cultures they were valued as empowering – pharaohs taking in the smell of the lily of the Nile appear in Egyptian reliefs and wall paintings – and as a means of communication with the divine: fumigations with flowers in ritual services gave rise to the word perfume, derived from the Latin *per fumum* (37). Transcendence manifested in fragrance is one of the subtlest way of thinking the inebriating possession it takes of the human perception of the world, and of its ineffability, for like scent, it is a powerful presence to consciousness, even if it is technically elusive to grasp and sight which mostly determine our sense of reality, orientation and the metaphors that express concepts.

The city as flower

The name and emblem of the city of Florence – the stylized *giaggiolo* -, its cathedral dedicated to the Santa Maria del Fiore, its foundation myth connected to the Roman fertility rituals of the Floralia, and its sophisticated tradition of flower metaphors in literature and visual arts passing through Dante's mystic rose and Botticelli's *Primavera*, inspires thoughts about the cultural value of flowers and their power to signify. Before modern industrialization opposed cities to nature, Florence actualized an exemplary fusion of nature and culture, by literally bringing nature into the city gardens and green theatres and interacting with plants in religious rituals, magic, medical practice and botany, but also metaphorically, by absorbing archaic meanings of vegetal fertility in Christian mythology and translating them into creativity as flourishing of the human person and the community. Imitating Nature and taking her as the greatest and most divine teacher, as Leon Battista Alberti recommended, understanding the world as having a mind, a soul and a body and postulating the harmonious correspondence of the *microcosm* and the *macrocosm* as Ficino did; attempting to

orchestrate human and cosmic rhythms in Orphic music or proposing an aesthetic canon that actuated natural proportions were just some gifts of Florence to the culture it is mostly famous for: the Renaissance. Within its stone walls the resistance to the passing time by intellectual, artistic and civic performances and the pursuit of beauty were supported by economic burgeoning, materialized in the golden florin, which made the fortune of the city in the first network of banks. To the economic, political and social factors that made Florence a culturally prosperous city one has to add the driving force of the underlying metaphor of flourishing. The very name of metaphor, from the Greek *metapherein*, – to carry over, across or beyond, to transfer-, can be taken as basically translating the meaning of a word beyond its common field of reference, but also understood in its capacity to inspire the human subject to self-transcendence. As Lakoff and Johnson argue "metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action. Such actions will, of course, fit the metaphor. This will, in turn, reinforce the power of the metaphor to make experience coherent. In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies"(38).

Conceiving the city as flower is a metaphor around which one can coalesce the history of Florence, but can also imagine the future of cities. This metaphor would not be just an exercise of imagination, but may be able to focalize energies and transform reality. Now, for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population lives in an urban area. Striving to integrate flexible natural forms and vegetation with the arid cement structures of big cities, as architects do, is not enough. One needs to rethink the city with a metaphor able to harmonize human nature, natural environment, technology and city culture, and to transform the inhabitants from estranged and compulsive city animals competing for their habitat, into beings placed, for example, at the center of the flower and flourishing with it. Can rethinking *autochtony* by encompassing technology, Heidegger pleaded for, be answered by this metaphor and its implicit city-rootedness? After all, instead of recurring to logical discourse to explain the essence of the human being as meditative Heidegger chose a quote from Johann Peter Hebel, whose inspiring power he was perfectly aware of: "We are plants which – whether we like to admit it to ourselves or not – must with our roots rise out of the earth in order to bloom in the ether and bear fruit." (Works, ed. Altwegg, III, 314)(39).

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