CHAPTER 3

Pleasures of the Proximate Senses

The senses, under the aegis and direction of the mind, give us a world. Some are "proximate," others "distant." The proximate senses yield the world closest to us, including our own bodies. The position and movements of our bodies produce proprioception or kinesthesia, somatic awareness of the basic dimensions of space. The other proximate senses are touch, sensitivity to changes in temperature, taste, and smell. Hearing and sight are considered the senses that make the world "out there" truly accessible. Since that distancing, momentary removal of self from object or event is essential to the aesthetic experience, it is not surprising that the aesthetic potential of the proximate senses has been undervalued.
by Kant, among others. Yet the proximate senses, separately and together, add immensely to the vitality and beauty of the world, and distancing can and does occur in our experience of them.

Proprioception or Kinaesthesia

"What is the proof of life? Movement," a ballet dancer writes. "And what higher and more beautiful movement is there than dancing? We use our bodies to manifest life itself." Movement is indeed life. Most of us, however, are seldom conscious of producing beautiful movements, even though to a keen observer they may seem so. From early childhood onward we are taught, or learn through imitation, how to sit, stand, and move in appropriate, even graceful, ways. Learning such postures and movements—learning manners—is integral to the process of becoming part of one's culture. To feel self-conscious about movement is to risk awkwardness, insincerity (or at least the appearance of it), and immobilization. Although the ordinary movements and gestures of life often have a certain facility and flair, we tend to be aware of them only when they have become strained or inappropriate—that is, ugly. Movement is thus like health, usually taken for granted until there is some lack in it. Occasionally, though, just as there are times we pause to savor our own physical well-being, so there are times when we know that we have made an exceptionally felicitous and efficient gesture.

Of course movement does improve with practice, but it is also a matter of talent. Some people can perform even the most ordinary tasks, like tying a shoelace or turning the pages of a book, with noticeable grace. Dancers and athletes, in particular, are aware of and enjoy their bodies' liberating power. Many of them discovered this awareness and enjoyment as children. Roger Bannister, who broke the barrier of the four-minute mile, recalls his exhilaration when, as a child, he ran 'barefoot on firm dry sand.' He remembers being 'startled, and frightened, by the tremendous excitement that so few steps could create.' "I glanced around uneasily to see if anyone was watching. A few more steps and the earth seemed almost to move with me. I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. . . . I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamed existed." These talented people may express exuberance kinesthetically on the spur of the moment, or recall their delight in bodily motion and contact with nature as young adults. One cold and crisp afternoon, the professional hockey player Eric Nesterenko drove his car unthinkingly onto a broad expanse of ice on the street. He got out of the car and put on his skates. "I took off my camel-hair coat. I was just in a suit jacket, on my skates. And I flew. Nobody was there. I was as free as a bird. . . . Incredible! It's beautiful!" Albert Camus remembers vividly his youthful joustings with sea and sun in Algiers. "As I swim, my water- varnished arms flash out to turn gold in the sunlight, and then plunge back with a twist of all my muscles, the water streams along my whole body as my legs take tumultuous possession of the waves—and the horizone disappears." For Camus, an event that occurred long ago, his sensitive joy in nature and in the competence of his own body—in movement—retains the immediacy of now, as though he had just climbed out of the water.

The Flow Experience

Many people who do physical work well—carpentering, chopping down a tree, scything—feel visceral pleasure in the ease and naturalness of what they do, in their skill. Robert Hale is an academic anatomist. His delight in his work carries over into the domestic sphere. "You can't imagine," he says, "the silent fun I have at dinner parties while eating my food and dissecting a beautiful muscle. How I enjoy the spinalis dorsi—largely constituting a lamb chop. And I get almost sensual pleasure from skillfully dissecting a harmless pineapple, cutting all around the hard core."

Deep engagement in almost any kind of mental or physical activity can produce what the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls the "flow" experience. "Flow" is not so much a scientist's technical term as how people in a wide range of occupations have described their feeling of apparently effortless control over what they do—a frictionless power the exer-
cise of which generates a sense of being fully alive—fully aware of one’s own movement and of one’s environment.” A famous account of this flow experience in Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina occurs in the midst of hard physical labor:

Levin [the landowner] lost all count of time and had no idea whether it was late or early. A change began to come over his work which gave intense satisfaction. There were moments when he forgot what he was doing, when he mowed without effort and his line was almost as smooth and good as Titus’s. . . . The longer Levin mowed, the oftener he experienced these moments of oblivion when it was not his arms which swung the scythe but the scythe seemed to mow of itself, a body full of life and consciousness of its own, and as though by magic, without a thought given to it, the work did itself regularly and carefully. These were the most blessed moments.

EVERY MOTION A DANCE

In routine factory work, what counts is the tangible end product, not the workers’ motions in its manufacture. Workers therefore tend not to see their bodies as instruments to be nurtured and trained. In sport, the goal is as precisely defined as in factory work: to reach a certain speed or height, to win against an opposing team. But unlike factory workers, athletes, to reach their goal, have to be highly conscious of the power and limits of their own bodies. The body is the athlete’s instrument of success. It has to be nurtured and trained, mentally as well as physically. The athlete has to rehearse in his mind the necessary motions in relation to the barriers to be overcome. “A beautiful shot!” spectators exclaim as the ball rolls into the hole. The golfer himself feels the economy and elegance of the swing. In sport, success may be all-important, but the means to it have their own beauty and justification.

In dance, a particular gesture or motion is both a part of a larger composition and an end in itself. It must be artistically flawless. To keep their bodies and minds attuned as possible to the aesthetics of stance and motion, some dancers train themselves to be continuously conscious of the poetry of movement in everything around them—a newspaper blowing down the sidewalk, a bird landing on the telephone wire—and in everything they do, like setting the table and sipping coffee. “Every day the whole day from the minute you get up is potentially a dance,” says the choreographer and dancer Deborah Hay. “I dance by directing my consciousness to the movement of every cell in my body simultaneously so that I can feel parts of me from the inside out. . . . I dance by feeling the movement of space simultaneously all over my body so that it is like bringing my sensibility to the very edges of my being from my head to my toe so that I can feel the movement of the air around me.”

Dancers can simultaneously project an image of total absorption and yet stand apart from themselves critically. They are able to view, Susan Foster writes, “their own bodies’ effortless execution of the movement. Or they gaze up and out from the dance toward the audience, as if enjoining viewers to admire and take pleasure in their elegant rendition.”

Dance is the most ephemeral of arts. It is inscribed on air, not on paper, canvas, or stone. Except when captured by a movie or video camera, a work lasts no longer than the performance. Like composers, choreographers cannot expect their works to attain the degree of permanence—a reality to which artist and audience alike can return again and again—that writers, sculptors, and other artists in graphic media do as a matter of course. To the dancer, the end of a perfect line of movement marks the end of a beauty never to be precisely recaptured. The beauty of dance lies in part in this poignancy—an existence so fleeting that it seems, paradoxically, to transcend time.

Touch

The human skin is the most important human sensory system. As the anthropologist Ashley Montagu notes, “A human being can spend his life blind and deaf and completely lacking the senses of
smell and taste, but he cannot survive at all without the functions performed by the skin.” Stimulation of the skin is necessary to the proper working of the digestive and eliminative organs, especially in the very young; it is essential to survival and growth. Mammalian mothers lick and groom their offspring for a considerable time after birth. In humans, according to Montagu, contractions of the uterus during the exceptionally long period of labor may provide necessary stimulation to fetal skin. And all young mammals find pleasure in snuggling and cuddling up to another warm body.

That pleasure diminishes little with age. Initially it may seem to be a wholly inner-directed physical sensation, registered first at the skin surface and then quickly suffusing the whole body. We lower ourselves into a hot bath and register pure sensual delight from the temperature and feel of the water; later, drying off with a towel, we feel pleasure in the stimulated skin. But the mind often takes a part, too, appraising the water’s qualities, appreciating the sensations of trunk and limbs soaking in the hot water and, later, the towel’s fluffy, enveloping warmth.

"Tactile aesthetics," portentous and esoteric as it may sound, refers to the most common and necessary of aesthetic experiences. The pleasures of being alive and our deepest sense of well-being depend on cutaneous rewards that may come anyw... anywhere: the coolness of a stone in the shade, the warmth of a coffee cup, the smoothness of a baby’s skin, the cuddling pressure of a heavy sweater, the silken texture of a kitten’s fur, the roughness of a cobbled walk, the soft kiss of raindrops, “the delicious comfort of a balmy spring day as I walk beneath a row of trees and sense the alternating warmth and coolness of sun and shade,” the feel of the carpet under the desk as you slip your stocking foot out of your mocassins and brush your foot over its plush surface, and even “the slippage of the inner surface of the sock against the underside of your foot, something you normally only get to experience in the morning when you first pull the sock on.”

Modern society and scholars alike tend to discount the importance of tactile pleasures. Bodily contact and skin-to-skin stimulation, perhaps because they are thought to contribute merely to our physical well-being, are least esteemed in the scale of modern cultural values. "Have you hugged your child today?" This bumper-sticker tag suggests that even children cannot count on reassuring bodily contact. Among adults, touching and hugging as a manner of greeting are increasingly rare. In the United States, even the handshake is going out of fashion. The shower, the hot bath, and refinements such as the Jacuzzi have emerged as modern (not altogether satisfactory) substitutes for bodily contact; even in a society geared to "good times," one of humankind’s greatest and most easily accessible sources of pleasure has become taboo.

We are also losing touch, in the literal sense, with nature. Children still enjoy jumping into a pile of leaves, slipping down a tree trunk, or rolling down a bank of snow. But adults have learned to enjoy nature mainly by simply looking at it. If they reach out for tactile rewards, they tend to do so in the context of strenuous sport: the impact of crampons on granite, the milky smoothness of ice beneath the skate, the violent rush of air in skydiving. D. H. Lawrence yearned for more direct and passionate contact, as his account of a man communing copatively with vegetation shows:

He was happy in the wet hillside, that was overgrown and obscure with bushes and flowers. He wanted to touch them all, to saturate himself with the touch of them all. He took off his clothes, and sat down naked among the primroses . . .

But they were too soft. He went through the long grass to a clump of young fir-trees, that were no higher than a man. The soft sharp boughs bent upon him . . . , threw little cold showers of drops on his belly, and beat his loins with their clusters of soft sharp needles . . . . To lie down and roll in the sticky, cool young hyacinths, to lie on one’s belly and cover one’s back with handfuls of fine wet grass . . . ; and then to sting one’s thigh against the living dark bristles of fir-boughs . . . this was good, this was all very good, very satisfying.

Like the other human senses, touch is exploratory and hence can open up a world. Lawrence’s hero is discovering vegetation through the skin. But for most of us the human hand best embodies the seek-
ing, searching, and appreciative nature of touch. Hands present us
with a reality of discrete objects, many of which can be picked up
and examined for their form, size, weight, and texture. Hands are
restless; indeed, it is tempting to speak of them as curious. Children
feel impelled to touch; for them, touch is a primary method of learn-
ing. In our society, young children are given soft, rounded things to
play with. Among their early creations are mud pies; they knead and
pat formless matter into just the right shape, and in the process, rec-
ognize the consistency and malleability of various kinds of earth. As
they grow older, they play with harder and sharper objects; they
learn the hardness of a ball from the way it bounces off a bat, the
sharp corners of the "carpentered world" through playing with con-
struction sets, the differing textures of nature through poking
at them.

Touch is a delicate instrument for exploring and appreciating the
world. No special skill is needed to feel the difference between a
smooth pane of glass and one etched 1/2 inch deep. Running a
finger over bond paper, flower petals, and polished wood, we can tell
that they are not the same, either in temperature or in texture. Train-
ing, naturally, increases sensitivity; professional "cloth feelers" in
textile houses develop extraordinary competence in judging subtle
differences. But most of us have a comparable skill even without
training. One example is our knack of telling small variations in the
roughness of the sidewalk pavement by simply trailing a stick over
it. Most surprising is the way we feel the texture, not at the area of
contact between hand and stick, but at the end of the stick, as
though it were an anatomical extension of ourself—what James
Gibson calls an epiphenomenal vibrisa.16

The better we are able to see and the more vivid and sharply de-
tailed the world becomes, the safer and happier we tend to feel. A
parallel relationship holds with touch, though we are not quite so
aware of it, perhaps because pain, excesses of heat and cold, itch-
iness, and other irritations of skin are experiences that we can well do
without: a certain numbing of awareness or anesthesia seems at
times a blessed relief. Yet to be deprived of the sensitivity and flexi-

bility of the hand, even briefly and in small measure, is frustrating,
as we realize when we drive a car with heavy gloves on or try to tie a
shoelace with frozen fingers. Although young children are tolerant
of jam smeared on their face and hands, most adults find stickiness
a strangely uncomfortable sensation. We should like to feel the
beauty of the world. But the more we are aware of the world's abun-
dant offering of tactility and thermal delights, the more we are also
aware of its repellent aspects: the tactile pleasures of living grass and
human hair are countered by the disgust (partly but perhaps not
wholly induced by culture) with which we respond to contact with
unhealthy skin, feces, or a corpse.17

LANDSCAPES OF TOUCH

Most tactile sensations reach us indirectly, through the eyes. Our
physical environment feels ineluctably tactility even though we touch
only a small part of it. Reddish fluffy surfaces are warm, light-blue
glittering ones cool. A glass coffee table next to a polished walnut
chest is a tactility composition. A street lined by brownstone houses
and graceful trees makes a charming picture, but the charm comes as
much through our sense of touch as through the eyes. Seeing and the
tactility sensation are so closely wed that even when we are looking at
a painting it is not clear that we are attending solely to its visual qual-
ities. Bernard Berenson surprised the art world in 1896 by empha-
sizing that a painting must possess more than just visual excellence;
it must have "tactility values" that reach out and touch, even embrace,
the viewer.18 More recently, the art critic Robert Hughes has written
of John Constable: "His childhood was substance rather than fan-
tasy; tactility memories of mold, mud, wood grain and brick became
some of the most 'painterly' painting in the history of art. The fore-
ground of The Leaping Horse is all matter, and the things in it—
squidgy earth, tangled weeds and wild flowers, prickle of light on
the dark skin of water sliding over a hidden edge—are troweled and
spattered on with ecstatic gusto. This is the landscape of tactility.19

One reason for the strong appeal of nature is the range and com-
plexity of its tactility impress. In a small nook of the mineral world,
one may find granite and sand, grazed lava and viscous mud. A single flowering plant may have rough bark, smooth waxy leaves, and satiny petals. That wonderful work of nature, the human body, is exceptionally rewarding as an object for tactile exploration: an experienced lover's hand moves from rumpled hair and smooth firm breast to the soft skin below the armpits, the muscled thighs, the knee's hard knob, and registers at the same time a surprising range of temperature from the cool tip of the nose to the heat of the groin.

Landscape designers try to imitate, and improve on, nature's sensual wealth. Asian gardens are created with visual-tactile qualities in mind. A Chinese garden is composed of yin (soft) and yang (hard) elements—the softness of water and of undulating perforated garden walls, the hardness of craggy limestone rocks. An Islamic garden is a concordance of sight, sound, and scent, but it is also an oasis of thermal delight—its shades and coolness contrasting vividly with the glare and heat beyond its high walls. Similarly, modern householders more or less consciously arrange the interiors of their homes so as to provide comfort and variety to the sense of touch: a long-stemmed aluminum lamp may be placed next to heavy curtains, a table on spindly legs next to a leather ottoman, a bearskin rug on a polished parquet floor. Urban places, too, appeal to more than the eyes. An old European town with cobbled streets and half-timbered houses opening onto a sun-drenched plaza is a visual-tactile feast. It was not necessarily planned with such aesthetic effects in mind; these emerged as the result of happy happenstance and, more important, sensibilities that have been tested and refined over the centuries. We all know of cities or parts of cities, both old and new, that feel eminently livable, although why they do so eludes analysis. A secret of their success may lie in their tactile variation and warmth.

Like all other senses, the tactile sense is activated by contrast—alternations of heat and cold, roughness and smoothness, lightness and weight. Perhaps the range of appreciation (or tolerance) is narrower than that for, say, sight because it is more intimately bound to the basic physiological processes, elemental moods and emotions.

**TOUCH, REALITY, AND BEAUTY**

Touch is the sense least susceptible to deception and hence the one in which we tend to put the most trust. For doubting Thomas, seeing was not believing; he had to touch the resurrected Christ to believe. The real, ultimately, is that which offers resistance. The tactile sense comes up against an object, and that direct contact, felt sometimes as harsh impingement, is our final guarantee of the real.

What is the relation between reality and beauty, and of both to touch? Both beauty and reality are governed by necessity; both project a sense of the inevitable that transcends mere human will and desire. Beauty is "the order of the world," Simone Weil, manifest in mathematics, where lawful and necessary relations rule; and it is manifest also in the forces of nature—in gravity, which has impressed folds upon the mountains and on the waves of the sea. There is nothing arbitrary about these folds. They exist in obedience to natural forces, and a source of their beauty lies in our recognition of that fact.

The order of the world is accessible to us indirectly, says Weil, through the image. By means of the image, itself wholly dependent on an act of close attention, "we can contemplate the necessity which is the substance of the universe." But necessity can be known directly only through physical contact—"by the blows it deals." Physical labor is, for Weil, direct contact with necessity and the real, and hence the beauty of the world. Moreover, in its best moments, physical labor "is a contact so full that no equivalent can be found elsewhere." Artists, scientists, and contemplatives, trying to penetrate the veils of fantasy to reach the real, may instead add to the unreal by fabricating their own illusions. Those who earn a living through physical labor are less likely to fall under illusion, for they feel the impingements of matter almost constantly. "He who is aching in every limb, worn out by the effort of a day of work, that is to say a day when he has been subject to matter," bears in his flesh the reality and beauty of the universe.

But we not only are impinged upon by external reality; we also impinge—that is, exert force—on it. Touch, unlike the other
senses, modifies its object. It reminds us that we are not only observers of the world but actors in it. With this awareness comes pride in our ability to do and make, but a pride that is shadowed by guilt, for unmaking precedes making: we are both destroyers and creators.

Eating, Taste, and Culture

Eating is a mode of touch. "Eating is touch carried to the bitter end," says Samuel Butler. It forcefully reminds us of our animal nature. Culture masks human animality; when the mask slips, the fact that we live by devoting other organisms rises to haunt us.

Watching people eat and noting what they eat, especially if they are of a different culture, is seldom an elevating experience. For the Chinese, eating has close ties to health, medicine, and a cosmological world view. Food preparation and consumption are considered an art. Yet these elevated cultural concepts are not always evident, at least not everywhere in China, and not to an outsider. Colin Thubron, for one, finds the Chinese national obsession with food, ascending to "a gawking crescendo," repellent. He describes an eating quarter in the nontourist part of Canton around 1980. Feastiers, mostly men, gather around the tables. "Every course drops into a gawking circumference of famished tastes and rapt cries. Diners burp and smack their lips in hoggish celebration." The concept of taboo, Thubron notes, seems wholly absent. "In Cantonese cooking, nothing edible is sacred. It reflects an old Chinese meekness toward their surroundings. Every part of every animal—pig stomach, lynx breast, whole bamboo rats and salamanders—is consumed." Thubron, searching for something he can eat, enters a rowdy restaurant, where the waitress relentlessly plies him with "shredded rat thick soup and braised python with mushrooms."

This account, though it is different tastes and values, should make any thinking person uneasy about food preparation and eating. In these activities, biological imperatives are worrysome joined to sensual delight, the killing and evocation of living things to art, animality to the claims of culture, taste (a process in the mouth's cavern) to that refined achievement known as "good taste." As people become more and more conscious of their status as dignified cultural beings, eating/tasting tends to be done in public only when it is accompanied by some other, more obviously respectable activity, such as social conversation and music. And if one has to eat alone in a restaurant, one pretends to be engaged simultaneously in the higher occupation of reading a magazine.

Nevertheless, eating/tasting is a cultural activity in its own right, with a long history. Let us consider the aesthetics of food preparation and eating in two parts of the world—Europe and China.

Food and Manners in Europe

From the Middle Ages to modern times, Europe underwent progressive refinement in all things concerning food—its preparation, the dishes offered, table manners, utensils, and the larger setting of hall or room. It experienced the development of taste—good taste. The progression was by no means linear. There have been several swings between an ideal of simplicity and an ideal of luxuriance, between foods commended for their natural and exquisite flavor and foods commended for their symphonic richness—the effect of using artfully simple ingredients.

In the late Middle Ages, food still tended to be messy, prepared pot-mell. Expensive spices and viands might find themselves bedded in the same dish with meats that were none too fresh and were very probably contaminated by the filth in the kitchen. The range and quantity of food would have bewildered and repelled a modern gourmet. Plantagenet kings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries ate everything that had wings, from bustards to sparrows, hens, egrets, and bitterns; and everything that swam, from marmalades to porpoises. Medieval cooks used vegetables and herbs profusely and indiscriminately. Many dishes were created by combining every scrap of greens that came to hand. In a hare stew one might find cabbage, beets, borage, mallow, parsley, betony, the white part of leeks, the tops of young nettles, and violets. Roses, hawthorn, and primroses might also find their way into a dish.

For the wealthy, a medieval dinner consisted of two or three courses, but each course could contain more than a dozen different...
kinds of food heaped high on large platters. Guests were confronted by such rich fare as shields of boiled and pickled boar, hulled wheat boiled in milk and venison, oily stews, salted hart, pheasant, swan, capons, lampreys, perch, rabbit, mutton, baked custard, and rare fruit. The second course was again made up of a large array of rich meats and fish hardly distinguishable from the first. The concept of an orderly sequence—soup, fish, meat, and dessert—did not appear until the end of the seventeenth century. Copiousness, rather than discrimination, was the key concept in premodern culinary art. Cooks were indifferent to the unique textures and flavors of the materials that went into a cauldron. The French critic and poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux mentions an enormous mixed grill consisting of a hare, six chickens, three rabbits, and six pigeons, all served on the same plate. These hodgepotes were relentlessly overcooked, probably because the game was usually "high." One of the recipes for ragout, which Louis XIV and his courtiers were fond of, called for putting a number of different kinds of flesh and fowl in a cauldron, adding a large quantity of spice, and stewing the mixture for twelve hours. It is unlikely, in W. H. Lewis's view, that this dish "would be saved at the twelfth hour by a lavish top dressing of musk, amber, and assorted perfumes."  

Before the seventeenth century, the preparation of most dishes, even of the pâtes, meats, and side dishes of ostentatious feasts, required little imaginative forethought. Thereafter, carefully prepared meals for discerning people began to emerge. The French words gourmand and gourmet, both initially used to express unqualified praise, won general acceptance in urban Europe. A further sign of refinement in taste lay in the serving of foods on several small dishes rather than on a few large platters. Incompatible flavors were thus kept apart. After 1700, more and more dishes accepted the notion that the distinctive flavor and texture of a dish rather than the quantity and expense of its ingredients should be the primary criteria of excellence. The care that went into cooking by the middle of the eighteenth century is suggested by the menu for a reception in honor of the Archbishop of Besançon. Among the dishes listed were "Bisque d'écrevisses, potage à la reine, grenouilles à la poulette, truites grillées, anguilles en serpentin, filets de brochet, carpes du Doubs avec coulis d'écrevisses, tourte de laitannes de carpes."  

After the French Revolution, France led Europe in transforming cooking into an art in the grand style and an honored profession, with its own literature and roster of famous names. The most distinguished chef of this time was Antonin Carême. In the creation of dishes he strove, paradoxically, for both ostentation and simplicity. Trained in pâtisserie, an art that encouraged creative leavings, he extended the architectural style to cooking generally. For a grand dinner, he might erect picturesque ruins made of lard and Greek temples in sugar and marzipan so that the gastronome's mind, and not just his palate, could be pleasurably stimulated. Carême's creations were also architectural in that they had a "built" character: they were made of pâtées, essences, and sauces that were themselves complex creations and yet were listed simply as ingredients along with a piece of celery or a chopped onion. A dish, in other words, was the culmination of a long and elaborate process.  

Carême achieved simplification by eliminating medieval survivals such as trimmings of cockscombs and sweetbreads. More important, he established the principle of garnishing meat with meat, fish with fish. His culinary aesthetic is caught in Lady Sydney Morgan's description of a dinner at the Baron de Rothschild's: "No dark-brown gravies, no fleur of cayenne and allspice, no tincture of catsup and walnut pickle, no visible agency of those vulgar elements of cooking of the good old times, fire and water. Distillations of the most delicate viands, extracted in silver dews, with chemical precision... formed the fond of all. Every meat presented its own natural aroma—every vegetable its own shade of verdure."  

Even in Carême's elaborate achievements, his aim was not to superimpose and confuse flavors, but rather to isolate and throw them into relief.  

Despite his own success in creating "simple" and distinctive flavors, in general Carême's approach encouraged ostentation and, with it, the sacrifice of flavor for grand visual effects. Master cooks had yielded to this temptation since at least Roman times: thus Petronius described a feast in which a hare was tricked out with wings to look like a Pegasus, and roast pork carved into models of fish,
songbirds, and a goose. For millennia, then, chefs in the West have often "played with food," treating edibles as materials for sculpture and architecture, as though the creation of alluring flavors could not in itself win for them high standing.

Closer to our time, Georges Auguste Escoffier rivaled Carême in celebrity and influence. Like his predecessor, Escoffier was capable of architectural grandeur, but his reputation rested more on achieving a perfect balance between a few superb ingredients—sometimes such rare items as truffle and crayfish, but also quite ordinary ingredients that even the most common middle-class kitchen could afford. One of Escoffier's best known creations was Peach Melba: to a coupling of vanilla ice cream with peach, he gave a final touch of perfection by balancing the smooth sweetness of the cream and the textural resistance and flavor of the peach with the tartness of raspberries.

Food is basic, and people's taste for food tends to be traditional, conservative, associated with old family recipes and perhaps also regional ones. People tend to like what they have always had. The business of "inventing" new flavors seems a questionable venture. Yet cooking and the tastes developed for it have a long history of innovation and change. In post-Revolutionary France, chefs who established their own businesses after the departure or demise of their aristocratic patrons competed with one another for a growing, gastronomically sophisticated clientele. They were driven to offer fresh gustatory pleasures. In the nineteenth century, this demand for originality became ever more insistent. Escoffier, to maintain his reputation, was compelled to devise new dishes all the time. He writes: "I have ceased counting the nights spent in the attempt to discover new combinations, when, completely broken with the fatigue of the heavy day, my body ought to have been at rest."

The greatest challenge lay not in the profusion of expensive ingredients and strong flavors, but (as Escoffier had seen) in obtaining a deeply satisfying gastronomic experience with a few choice ingredients. In the history of Western cooking, the virtues of simplicity and subtlety were periodically recognized and elevated to serve as criteria of excellence. The latest rejection of rich sauces and complicated foods in general occurred in the 1960s, giving rise to a style known as nouvelle cuisine. Chefs insisted on buying the freshest vegetables and meats available in the market each day. The elevation of freshness—the desire to bring out the qualities inherent in the material—caused for reduced cooking time for most seafoods, game birds, and veal, but especially for green vegetables. Seeming as a method of cooking also found favor in nouvelle cuisine. Both the emphasis on reduced time and on steaming reflect Chinese influence.

FOOD AND MANNERS IN CHINA

Perhaps no other civilization has put as much emphasis on the art of cooking or taken so much pleasure in food as the Chinese. Since the earliest times, cooking in China has carried a prestige unmatched and perhaps somewhat incomprehensible to people in other cultures. The Li Chi, a Confucian classic with materials dating back to the fifth century B.C. and earlier, treats the evolution of culture as though it were a matter of the evolution of cooking skills.

Formerly the ancient kings knew not yet the transforming power of fire, but ate the fruits of plants and trees, and the flesh of birds and beasts, drinking their blood and swallowing the hair and feathers. The later sages then arose, and men learned to take advantage of fire. They toasted, grilled, boiled, and roasted. They produced must and sauces. They were thus able to nourish the living, and to make offerings to the dead; to serve the spirits of the departed and God.

Ritual disciplines attention and encourages people to develop their powers of discernment and discrimination. "In putting down a boiled fish to be eaten," the Li Chi asseverates, "the tail was laid in front. In winter it was placed with the fat belly on the right; in summer with the back. . . . All condiments were taken up with the right hand, and were therefore placed on the left. . . ." Everything in ritual, not least food, must be done correctly. Confucius reportedly "did not eat meat which was not cut properly, nor what was
served without its proper sauce." Clearly, the sage was a fastidious ritualist, but this fact does not exclude the likelihood that he also had a sophisticated palate and a well-developed aesthetic sensibility. Food is also medicine, and no doubt the understanding of foods—not only their texture and taste but their nutritive and curative powers—has gained enormously by the association. In China, the exceptionally varied kinds of food eaten reflect in part the poverty of the people, who could not afford to disdain anything that satisfied hunger, and in part the unending search for materia medica—the healing qualities of plants, animals, and their minutely differentiated parts. That health depends on dietary regulation is a belief that the Chinese have shared with Westerners through the millennia. What distinguishes the Chinese is the way they have subsumed food and medicine under the overarching, universal principles of yin and yang. Most foods can be classified as having either yin or yang properties, and the wise eater is one whose diet exhibits a proper balance. Harmony in food is the desideratum, as it is in all other areas of Chinese life. Extremes and excesses are to be avoided.

Nevertheless, excesses have occurred. Ordinary people tended to overeat because they had no assurance that food would always be available to them. The rich offered mountains of food on social occasions and overindulged from the desire to impress. An eighteenth-century poet and hedonist, Yuan Mei, wrote in his book Recipes from Suzhou Garden: "I always say that chicken, pork, fish and duck are the original genuses of the board, each with a flavour of its own, each with its distinctive style; whereas sea-slug and swallow-nest (despite their costliness) are commonplace fellows, with no character—in fact, mere hangers-on." But swallow-nest carried prestige, whereas mere chicken and pork did not. When a provincial governor offered Yuan Mei "plain boiled swallow-nest, served in enormous vases, like flower-pots," the poet was unimpressed and declared that "it had no taste at all." 19

The other extreme is abstinence. In the Western world, hermits and other ascetics to spiritual elevation have restricted themselves to stale bread and water. The Chinese have seldom carried abstinence so far. Buddhists, required to abstain from meat, ingeniously con-cooked "imitation meats" of the most mouth-watering texture and flavor. A scholar-official, disaffected with the luxuries of city and court, might sing of rural simplicity, but it was a simplicity that—as least in matters of food—did not necessarily sacrifice taste. Thus a thirteenth-century dramatist envisaged, no doubt somewhat ideally, a simple harvest meal under the gourd trellis, where workers could "drink wine from earthen bowls and porcelain pots, swallow the tender eggplants with their skins, and gulp down the little melons, seeds and all." 20

The Chinese love of food—their search for pleasures of the palate—is reflected, first, in the sheer variety of what they eat. The Chinese are true omnivores, with few taboos, and these local. Frederick Mote writes of the animal fare alone: "Beyond such relatively ordinary items (in the West) as hares, quails, squabs, and pheasants, a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) source also mentions as standard foods: cormorants, owls, storks and donkeys, mules, tigers, deer of several varieties, wild boars, camels, bears, wild goats, foxes and wolves, several kinds of rodents, and mollusks and shellfish of many kinds."

A second indicator of this love of food is the number and popularity of specialized restaurants. In Hang-chou, at about the time Marco Polo visited it, a resident could go to a place where only iced food was served; other specialized shops and their offerings included "the sweet soya soup at the Mixed-Waters Market, a pig cooked in ashes in front of the Longevity-and-Compassion Palace, the fish soup of Mother Sung . . ., boiled pork from Wei-the-Big-Knife at the Cat Bridge, and honey fritters from Chou-number-five in front of the Five-span Pavilion. Among the more exotic dishes were scented shellfish cooked in rice wine, goose with apricots, lotus seed soup, pimento soup with mussels, fish cooked with pumis; and among the most common, fritters and thinly-sliced soufflés, ravioli and pies."

A third indicator is the exceptionally rich vocabulary of taste and texture. The words used are not limited to cooks and gourmets but are a part of ordinary speech in daily use. "T'ai describes a highly desired texture closely tied to freshness and the critical importance of
not overcooking. Ti’ai offers resistance to the teeth followed by, as E. N. Anderson puts it, “a burst of succulence,” as exemplified in newly picked bamboo shoots, fruit ripe enough to eat but not soft, fresh vegetables quickly stir-fried, and chicken boiled a very short time so that it is just done. Anderson goes on to list other evaluative words: “shuang (resilient, springy, somewhere between crunchy and rubbery, like some seaweeds), and kueh (translated ‘sweet,’ but including anything with a sapid, alluring taste). Fried foods should be su—oily but light and not soggy—rather than ni (greasy). Above all, foods should taste hsi-en, which means not just fresh but au point in general. . . . In south and east China particularly, foods are often praised by being described as ob’ing, ‘clear’ or ‘pure.’ This means that they have a delicate, subtle, exquisite flavor—not obtrusive, heavy, or harsh.”

The final reflection of the Chinese love of food is the detailed knowledge of its geography, possessed by the literati simply as part of the baggage of being cultured. A special food is often named after its locality—for example, Peking duck. The way to offer an irresistible invitation to dine is to say that a delicacy—be it only a vinegar—has been obtained from a locality famed for that particular product. Connoisseurship of tea and spring water can be carried to great heights. A scholar of the early seventeenth century, Chang Tai, was such a connoisseur. One day he called on a fellow scholar and expert on tea, Min Wenshui, who lived in another town. As soon as he entered Min Wenshui’s residence, his nostrils were assailed by a wonderful fragrance.

“What is this tea?” I asked. “Langwan,” Wenshui replied. I tasted it again and said, “Now don’t deceive me. The method of preparation is Langwan, but the tea leaves are not Langwan.” “What is it then?” asked Wenshui smiling. I tasted it again and said, “Why is it so much like Lochieh tea?” Wenshui was quite struck by my answer and said, “Marvelous! Marvelous!” “What water is it?” I asked. “Huich’uan,” he said. “Don’t make fun of me,” I said. “How can Huich’uan water be carried here over a long distance, and after the shaking on the way, still retain its keenness?” So Wenshui said, “When I take Huich’uan water, I dig a well, and wait until night until the new current comes, and then take it up. I put a lot of mountain rocks at the bottom of the jar, and during the voyage I permit only sailing with the wind, but no rowing. Hence the water keeps its edge.”

To the modern Western reader, this exchange between two Chinese friends on the quality and provenance of tea and water may seem excessive—an exercise in connoisseurship better suited to the high arts of music and painting. The exchange does show, however, the extraordinary importance the Chinese have traditionally given to the palate. To be cultured is, first, to know the rites and the classics; second, to have a certain flair for poetry and painting; third, to be an aesthete of food—to appreciate its precise flavor and texture. But although good professional cooks are respected, cooking, with its unavoidable violence of chopping and cutting, boiling and frying, and its intimate association with blood and death, tends to arouse unease. Tasting itself should be suspect, since it leads to destruction, but somehow the Chinese (like people in the West) have managed to repress this knowledge. Tasting now seems almost wholly an aesthetic activity.

**Smell**

When we say that a food tastes good, we are not speaking with physiological precision, for much of what is tasteful in food is contributed by smell. The organs of taste and smell are so close to each other and their effects so thoroughly intertressed that we habitually treat them as one.

Smell gives us many innocent pleasures, yet its aesthetic standing, particularly in the Western world, is low. Kant denied aesthetic standing to smell altogether. Freud attributed the “fateful process of civilization” to “man’s adoption of an erect posture,” which had the effect of giving the eyes rather than the nose the primary role in sexual excitement. In the eighteenth century, European travelers and thinkers believed that the sense of smell was better developed among savages, especially young ones, than among the civilized.
People of refinement took for granted that smell lay at the bottom of the hierarchy of senses; they were suspicious of sniffing and smelling and of any predilection for powerful animal or sexual odors. It was and still is a common prejudice to regard the eyes and the ears as the noble organs, and the nose as primitive or animal.

**Bonding and Memory**

Humans are primarily visual beings. Our distance sensor is the eye, unlike nonprimate mammals, for whom the nose opens up space and pinpoints distant objects of desire. The sensitive surface of a dog's or a deer's nose is some thirty times larger than it is in a human; their olfactory world is not only larger but filled with a degree of detail and delicate discrimination that people can barely imagine. Smell, compared with sight and hearing, affects our emotions at a more deeply buried level. The olfactory sense is linked to a primitive part of the brain that controls emotions and mood and the involuntary movements of life, including breathing, heartbeat, pupil size, and genital erection. The smell of food can make one's mouth water; the musky odor of sex—the yeasty "baked bread" fragrance of the body—can cause involuntary sexual arousal. Somerset Maugham's test for whether a woman is truly in love with a man is not whether she likes how he looks but whether she likes the smell of his raincoat. The appeal of odor goes beyond, or below, reason. Police society will not admit that foot fetishism is as much olfactory as visual bondage. A dedicated few regard even the armpit as a "charming grotto, full of intriguing odorous surprises."

A mother who takes time to admire the delicate and perfectly formed fingers of her infant is having an aesthetic experience—one of many such experiences that strengthen the mother-infant bond. Odor cements the bond, too, but at a less conscious level. At only six weeks an infant shows a strong preference for its own mother's scent over that of another woman. And the mother is able to distinguish by scent alone her two-day-old infant's basinet from another's. A child's own earliest attachment to environment may well be acquired through the nose. The mother is the newborn's first and most significant place, recognized more by scent than by facial configuration. When the child is old enough to walk and explore its nonhuman environment, it clutches a blanket as a source of comfort and security. The soft tactile quality of the blanket gives reassurance; no less comforting, however, is its rich mix of human odors.

The directness and immediacy of smell provide a sharp contrast to the abstractive and compositional propensities of sight. Perhaps for this reason an odor can resurrect the past with a vividness that no visual image can. I have direct evidence of this phenomenon. I returned to Sydney, Australia, twenty-three years after leaving it as a child, expecting the experience to be filled with nostalgia. This did not happen. Sydney had been transformed during my absence; many old landmarks had been demolished and supplanted by gleaming new buildings. Yet my old home was still there, next to a beach, bordered by a promenade. The beach, the promenade, and a little playground with its row of swings remained much the same. Still, the past eluded me. I could not project myself back into childhood except as an intellectual exercise. Although the physical place had not altered, my perception of it had. I saw the beach one way as a child; as an adult, I saw it in quite another way, with different focuses and values. My eyes failed me in my quest. But my nose did not, for just as I was about to conclude that I could not go home again, a strong whiff of seaweed assaulted my nostrils, and I was thrown back to childhood. For a fleeting instant I stood on the beach, a twelve-year-old again. Odor has this power to restore the past because, unlike the visual image, it is an encapsulated experience that has been left largely uninterpreted and undeveloped.

**Savor of Life**

Until they are deprived of their sense of smell, people tend to be unaware of the fact that odor contributes much of the savor of life. A common cold curtails smell for a short time. A head injury, by contrast, can so damage the olfactory tracts that the victim permanently loses the world of odor. The loss is keenly felt. One man who suffered such a debilitating injury says: "You smell people, you smell books, you smell the city, you smell the spring—maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. [After the accident] my whole world was suddenly radically poorer." Food without aroma has little appeal; indeed, it can be repellent. One
then eats simply to survive. Another victim of such a loss says: "Of course, I had to eat—I didn't want to die. But the regular food—it was all like garbage. . . . I could drink a little cold milk. I could eat a little cold boiled potato. . . . I could eat a little vanilla ice cream. That stuff, it didn't taste good, but it didn't taste bad. It didn't have any taste at all. This victim can no longer bear to drink coffee, the memory of its aroma, now only a memory, is intolerable."

The loss of a taste for food is often accompanied by a loss of appetite for sex. Robbed of scent, life and the world become gray and passionless. Visual and auditory beauties cannot altogether compensate for the deprivation of stimuli that arouse the deepest emotions and instincts of one's animal nature.

What if one possessed an extraordinary sense of smell? What if smell were the dominant sense, as it is in a dog? Of course, we cannot fully enter another species' experiential reality, but we can gain an insight into it from abnormal experiences, such as the one reported by the neurologist Oliver Sacks. A medical student, when he was on amphetamines, dreamed vividly one night that he had become a dog living in a world of rich odors. Waking, he continued to find himself in just such a world.

He experienced a certain impulse to sniff. . . . Sexual smells were exciting and increased—but no more so, he felt, than food smells and other smells. Smell pleasure was intense—smell displeasure, too—but it seemed to him less a world of mere pleasure and displeasure than a whole aesthetic, a whole judgment, a whole new significance, which surrounded him. "It was a world overwhelmingly concrete, of particulars," he said, "a world overwhelming in immediacy, in immediate significance." Somewhat intellectual before, and inclined to reflection and abstraction, he now found thought, abstraction and categorisation, somewhat difficult and unreal."

AN EDUCATED NOSE

From one angle, we may view odor as "primitive," something intimately associated with food and sex. From another angle, we can see that the discernment and appreciation of fragrance are capable of endless refinement. In humans, the sense of smell, no less than the other senses, must be developed under the aegis and pressure of culture if it is to fulfill its potential. Young children may have a keen sense of smell, but their olfactory world is limited by their narrow bands of attention. They crawl on the floor, which is a rich source of odor, or walk through meadows and grassy fields, where the plants' aromatic crowns may rise to the height of their faces, but unless they attend actively the odors escape them, or take hold only at an unconscious level never to be retrieved except perhaps through accidental jolts of memory.

The human sense of smell begins to be operative early. Even a couple of days after birth, newborn babies show sensitivity to odors. However, the response is to intensity rather than to character or type; there is little evidence that they appreciate one odor over another. A toddler who likes safron more than butyric acid on one trial may well reverse his opinion on another trial. Preference becomes somewhat less arbitrary as children grow older. From age four onward they show an increasing tendency to discriminate and differentiate between pleasant and unpleasant odors, and their preferences move from fruity fragrances to those of flowers and, still later, to fragrances of greater complexity and subtlety."

Despite the enduring myth that Ferdinand the Bull loves flowers, there is little evidence to show that bulls enjoy floral fragrance. Dogs, too, for all the sensitivity of their noses, seem little aware of the olfactory appeal of fruits and flowers. Yet liking for floral fragrance is widespread among humans in different parts of the world. This preference serves no discernible adaptive purpose; it is largely cultural. "The perfume of the honeysuckle and the sweet mellifluous scent of the countryside in the May sun are doubtless of practical use to the bee," says R. W. Moncrieff, "but to the human their value is mainly aesthetic and [somewhat] abstract," and perhaps also enhancing of "emotional maturity."

FRAGRANCES IN NATURE

Although the olfactory sense can give us not only physiological stimulation but a world of odors aesthetically satisfying in its way as the worlds of sight and sound, it is not cultivated to anything like
a similar extent. Pictorial geographies fill libraries, as do essays and poems praising the visual diversity and splendor of nature. But an olfactory geography and aesthetic is practically nonexistent. Few cultures acknowledge odor as a principal component of the natural environment. The introduction of fragrance into one’s setting is widely taken to be, at most, a supplementary or minor art. In China, for instance, numerous poems laud nature’s shapes, colors, and even sounds. “Homing birds head for the tall trees, p’ien-p’ien go their swift wings flapping.” The use of onomatopoeia is commonplace, but references to odor are rare even where we would expect them: “Summer plums—crimson fruit chilled in water, / autumn lotus root—tender threads to pluck, / but our happy days, when will they come?” Despite the power of odor to recapture the past, Chinese poets, for all their desire to evoke nostalgia, seem insensitive to its magic. When they do use fragrance in a poem, they almost always associate it with the presence of the human female; but nothing in Chinese literature matches the extended use of scent to embody the intensity and richness of love as in King Solomon’s Song of Songs.

Some kind of emotional bond with nature is universal. Aesthetic appreciation, including pleasure in nature’s odors, is, however, far less common, for such appreciation presupposes a large measure of confidence in relation to nature. In the Western world, wilderness elicited delight only when it no longer overwhelmed. Mountains and vast forests gained in aesthetic value as they became more accessible and lost their reputation for harboring hostile animals, humans, and demons. This process was slow and uneven. As late as the eighteenth century, the age-old fear of nature had not totally disappeared even among well-educated Europeans. Odorous effusions from the earth contributed to the fear. “The air of a place was a frightening mixture of the smoke, sulfur, and aequous, volatile, oily, and saline vapors that the earth gave off.” Quarries were open sores, exuding terrible threats from the depths of the earth—“metallic vapors” that attacked the nostrils and the brain. Peasants in the countryside were unhealthy because, when they bent down to till, they brought their faces too close to the soil. Cultivation, especially of virgin land, exposed whole villages to the threat of “morbific va-

pors.” Water in almost all forms—fog, dew, and air wafted in from the sea—was suspect even apart from the smell, but without doubt the greatest danger was perceived to come from the marshes and swamps, where vegetation and animal corpses fermented and decayed, letting lose a vile-smelling toxic miasma.

As in Europe, appreciation of nature emerged in China only as people became less suspicious of it. When northerners from the heavily settled and flatland Huang He basin migrated southward into a mountainous land covered with dense tropical forests, they were ambivalent about the pungent odors they encountered there. Poets of the Tang dynasty distinguishing between the relatively odorless North and the redolent South seldom took notice of the fragrance of exotic like rosewood, camphor, or cloves; rather, they were drawn to the familiar scents of the flowering orange and tangerine:

The forest is darkened by interlaced liquid amber leaves,  
The gardens are fragrant from tangerine blossoms.  
But who is my neighbor here beyond the waste?  
To console my loneliness clouds and sunsets must suffice.

Fragrance evoked mild pleasure and wistful melancholy rather than joy. Edward Schafer observes that although the pleasant aromas of the South, “so near to the sweet-smelling gardens and temples of Indianized lands,” could have inspired comparisons with the Perfumed Land of the Buddha, this did not happen. To the Chinese, “here was no Eden, but a fearful wilderness, whose evils were only partly offset by the awareness of orange blossoms in the heavy air.”

FRAGRANCES IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The small literature that exists on the smell of humanized landscapes (other than flower gardens) focuses overwhelmingly on bad or mixed odors. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Europeans were acutely conscious of the odors of decay and death in their built environments, particularly in prisons, asylums, workhouses, and in the quarters of the poor, but also in the richer parts of the city where sewers did not exist or malfunctioned, and in the badly ventilated
homes of the well-to-do. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European travelers to the Orient and Africa added significantly to the literature on pungent and noxious odors. "No account of India," writes Porteous, "from Kipling to the recent popular novels of M. M. Kaye and the accounts of Geoffrey Moorhouse, fails to invoke the peculiar smell of that subcontinent, half-corporeal, half-aromatic, a mixture of dung, sweat, heat, dust, rotting vegetation and spices."

City people have often noticed and recorded the richness of smells in the countryside: the strong whiffs of the organic manure that is amply spread over the soil on a Chinese peasant farm, the odors of manure and of farm animals in rural Europe. Although city people gladly bring home pictures of the countryside's views, they have no desire to bring home traces of its organic odors. Yet they may well appreciate these same odors in the places where they are perceived to belong. To a degree, this attitude also applies to the strong, distinctive regional odors to be found in Third World countries. Distinctive odors that assail the nostrils make a place seem real in a way that visual images alone do not. Moreover, complex odors of heat, sweat, and spice yield an agreeable impression of vitality.

It is easy to adapt to odor. We open the door of a bakery and are overcome by the fragrance of baked goods, yet a few minutes later we no longer notice it. Similarly, bad odors disappear after we have been exposed to them for a short time. Odors are more likely to be noticed when they are periodic. Perhaps for this reason, the onset of spring, at the end of a long and relatively odorless winter, has inspired many eloquent literary evocations of fragrance. Tolstoy describes the excitement he felt as a child after a spring thunderstorm: "On all sides crested skylarks circle with glad songs and swoop swiftly down . . . The delicious scent of the wood . . . , the odor of the birches, of the violets, the rotting leaves, the mushrooms, and the wild cherry is so enthralling that I cannot stay in the brickkha."

The traditional countryside of villages and farms also has a periodic odor that most travelers have commented on with pleasure: the fragrance of burning wood as local farmers and herders settle down in the evening to prepare their meals. This smell has been noted in the byways of Europe, Africa, and south Asia, its distinctive scent varying with the type of wood burnt. One traveler in Spain describes the particularly fine fragrance he encountered in Andalusia:

The goats and the cattle were being driven home, the voices of the men and women calling to one another like long streamers on the air. . . . But what was that sweet aromatic smell? Looking round me, I saw that every one of those flat gray roofs had a small chimney projecting from it and that from each of these chimneys there issued a plume of blue smoke which, uniting with other plumes, hung in a faint haze over the village. The women were cooking their suppers and for fuel they used boughs of rosemary, thyme, and lavender which were brought in on donkeys' backs, from the hills close by.

Another seasonal odor, much praised by writers and nature lovers of the eighteenth century, is the odor of newmown hay. It is not a flowery or obvious fragrance, and yet it has an immediate appeal, based on or strengthened by association with the idea of nature, of health and the outdoors, of freshness and youth. Newmown hay retains its attraction to city dwellers today—an attraction toughed by the wistful awareness that, in an increasingly urbanized world, waking up to the fragrance of newmown hay is becoming extremely rare.

**Fragrances in the City**

Cities have seldom smelled pleasant. Urban boosters rarely draw on the testimony of the nose. Good odor cannot really be expected in places where humans congregate in large numbers. In the past, the odors that repelled were organic in origin. As hygienic measures brought them under control, new offensive odors—automobile and industrial fumes—assaulted the nostrils. A city may retain a certain pleasing fragrance as the result of traditional practices that have no place in a modern city. Thus certain quarters of Rome are still scented by outdoor woodfires despite municipal prohibitions. Or a
city gains a distinctive aroma thanks to a particular industry. Baltimore, for example, is favored by the pungent odor from its spice factories. Certain lumber towns are enveloped in the clean smell of sawdust. In a sophisticated metropolis, a shaded street, lined by a variety of shops, can offer a real treat to the connoisseur of fragrance. Strolling along, we may pause by a fruit-and-vegetable stand to inhale the tangy aroma from the crates of oranges and lemons, mixed with the earthier odors of cabbages and potatoes; next to it, a tray of secondhand books exudes a papery and faintly musty scent of inexplicable charm to the bibliophile; a coffeeshop spills samples of its aroma into the open air of the sidewalk, as does a shoe shop when its door swings open to admit customers; and from the well-dressed and coiffed women on an upscale street we catch whiffs of expensive perfume. Vendors contribute significantly to a great city's olfactory ambiance. New York's air has recently been sweetened by the aroma of honey-roasted peanuts. "The vendors, with their deep-bellied copper pans and hidden heat sources, charm together a mixture of peanuts and sugary sauce that produces a wonderful smell. Not since the yam sellers of the first half of the century has a group of vendors so enriched the air we breathe."  

One measure of the difference in importance between sight and smell is the extent to which both are used in the planned environment. For those designing the ideal city, visual appeal is preeminent. Even much of the tactile-kinesthetic value of architectural design is derived through the eye: through sight rather than touch and imitative bodily posture we experience the smoothness or roughness of a wall, the repose or thrust of a roof. Nevertheless, odor is a component of environment, and major high cultures since antiquity have tried to control it and to enhance the aromatic quality of place through the burning of incense. The original purpose of burning incense was to dispel baneful spirits and, more commonly, to offer acceptable prayers to the gods.  

But the fact remains that fragrance in a censer diffuses through a building so that, in time, even when no incense is burning, a subtle aroma pervades it and its furnishings. Buildings can be designed to be aromatic. The Babylonians were among the pioneers of aromatic architecture. Sargon II (722–705 B.C.) used cedarwood for his palace at Khorsabad, as did Sennacherib (705–681 B.C.), who planned it so that an agreeable odor emerged when doors opened or closed. Solomon's temple made use of the cedars of Lebanon. The temple in which Christ taught, rebuilt in 20 B.C., was fragrant, thanks again to Lebanon's cedars. Some Indian temples were known as "houses of fragrance." Screens of vetiver rootlets were placed over the openings of a verandah and dampened with water. As the breeze entered the interior of the palace or temple, it would be perfume-laden and cooled. Similar mats, khut lattis, were woven to incorporate the scent of vetiver in the room.  

Important entryways might be made of sandalwood, which had the added advantage of resistance to termites. In China, the camphor tree, whose wood is both fragrant and termite resistant, became a popular building material from the third century onward. Architects used it to make elegantly sculptured panelings and lattices in palaces and temples, and also for the rafters of arcades, under which the literati might stroll, protected from the weather, to enjoy the view and the wood's delicate perfume. The emperor K'ang-hsi constructed a vast complex of stately apartments in 1703 in southern Manchuria. In one of these, the wood Machilus nana was used for the beams and paneling, which were deliberately left unvarnished and unpainted so that the wood's cedarlike scent might emerge.  

In all parts of the world, potted flowering plants have long been brought into buildings to impart a desirable aroma to the rooms. More unusual and ambitious is to surround a building with fragrant plantings so that their odor may penetrate into the interior with the help of either a natural or an artificial breeze. The Palace of Coolness, built in H'ang-chou, China, in the thirteenth century provides an outstanding example of this practice. It was made of ivory-white Japanese pinewood. "In front of it were several ancient pine trees. An artificial waterfall cascaded into a lake covered with pink and white water-lilies. In the vast courtyard surrounding the palace were hundreds of urns containing jasmine, orchids, pink-flowering ba-
nana, flowering cinnamon and other rare and exotic flowering shrubs. They were fanned by a windmill so that their fragrance should penetrate within the great hall of the palace.**

**AROMATIC GARDENS**

When we think of an aromatic place, we immediately think of a garden. The archetype of the garden is Eden or paradise. Images of paradise differ according to culture and historical period. Not surprisingly, given the abundance of aromatic plants in the Indian subcontinent, Hindu and Buddhist paradise gardens are more redolent than those of the Islamic or Christian tradition. A description of an Indian heaven may begin with visual and auditory rewards and end with fragrance: **"... This celestial abode is adorned with lotus lakes, and meandering rivers full of the five kinds of lotus whose golden petals, as they fade, fill the air with sweet odours."** However, the many images of paradise in the Koran emphasize touch and taste—the coolness of water or air, the soft couches, the abundance of delicious fruits, the rivers of milk and wine—but seldom mention aromas. 

Christian images of paradise have also varied widely over time, but in most sights has been primary, Jesus' heaven is so God-centered as to leave little room for mere sensual delight. The book of Revelation emphasizes sight and sound—rainbow-colored light and winged spirits singing a never-ending "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." To Augustine, eternal bliss consists in "seeing God." Dante's paradise is a visual world of circling light and color. In the early Middle Ages, however, odor and nature became more salient in paradisiacal images, perhaps because monasteries, located in the odoriferous countryside, enjoyed exceptional power and influence then. According to a ninth-century monk and poet, in paradise "lilies and roses always bloom... Their fragrance never ceases to breathe eternal bliss to the soul." A work called *Elucidation*, compiled around 1100 and copied often throughout the medieval period, depicts the new earth after the Last Judgment as a fragrant and pleasant garden. It will be irrigated with the blood of the saints and
decorated eternally with sweet-smelling flowers, lilies, roses, and violets that will never fade.**

No survey of aromatic ideal gardens would be complete without mention of Milton's Eden in *Paradise Lost*, which he began in earnest in 1658 after becoming totally blind. Arriving in Eden, the archangel Raphael

... now is come

Into the blissful field, through Groves of Myrrh,
And flowering Oils, Casta, Nard, and Balm;
A Wilderness of sweets, for Nature here
Wantoned as in her prime, and plac'd at will
Her Virgin Fancie, pouring forth more sweet,
Wilde above rule or art; enormous bliss. (V. 291-297)

Real gardens cater primarily to the eye. The visual emphasis is especially salient in the largest and most resplendent gardens of the Western world, such as those at Versailles, which have been designed as symbols of prestige, stages for pageantry, settings for amateur performances and spectacles. In China, too, since the eighteenth century connoisseurs have pretended to see gardens as landscape paintings—visually desirable objects—that one can miraculously enter. However, under the influence of Taoism and Buddhism, the garden was and is more importantly a place of retirement, repose, and contemplation. There eyes could turn inward as much as outward; they could be figuratively and literally half-closed. With the visual sense thus withdrawn from its position of dominance, the other senses—including smell—could be heightened. The plants in a Chinese garden are valued not only for their shape, color, and symbolic resonance, but also for their distinctive odors; thus pavilions might be located with sources of fragrance in mind—perhaps downwind from a lotus pond or in a pine grove.**

Enclosed gardens of modest size are common in many parts of the world besides China: for example, in countries that have come under Islamic influence. But even in the West, great gardens that appeal first to the eye may also boast small enclosures for retirement and re-
pose. In such an enclosed space, in a relaxed mood, seekers after peace are able to enjoy subtleties of sound and odor—the gentle twang of zither and the chirping of birds, the scent of herbs and flowering plants. In eighteenth-century Europe, the sequestered parts of gardens were designed with mounting attention to fragrance. In “serene regions” bordered by plants with odoriferous flowers or foliage, sweet, balsamic aromas would promote a tranquil state in which people gave themselves over to soothing sensations and reflection rather than to thrilling views and purposeful thought.

ODOR BIASES AND PREFERENCES
Attitudes toward odor are complex, ambiguous, and emotional. In the West, we have seen how a negative attitude developed in relation to the belief that nature’s odors could cause harm. The human body is a part of nature. Tolerance for its odors, which can be pungent after hard physical work, varies from culture to culture. Many nonliterate peoples bathed frequently, as did the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. By contrast, during the long period from the end of antiquity to modern times, even the elite of European society showed little interest in personal hygiene. They sought to counteract the effects by drenching themselves in perfume. From the late eighteenth century onward, with the development of medical science and engineering technology, members of the middle class became increasingly sensitive to odors of organic decay and physiological functioning, and tried hard to eradicate them from their houses and streets, as well as from their own bodies. One result is an ambivalence about odor itself, even odor considered pleasant.

Today, especially in Anglo-American society, people prefer odors that are subtle and faint. Some regard even the smells of a flower shop, greenhouse, bakery, leather goods store, and ethnic eating places a little too strong. At the other extreme, a completely odorless place, such as a camera shop, produces a somewhat sterile, cool, and distancing effect. In fact most offices, public spaces, and stores that cater to the middle class aspire to near odorlessness. The exceptions—grocery stores, old-fashioned general stores, bookshops that have a mixture of old and new books, the cosmetics section of a department store—have aromas that are pleasing not only because they are faint and complex but also because they are distinctive. Merchants now realize that odors can enhance the attractiveness of merchandise made of natural materials, making it seem more authentic, since almost all natural objects, including rock, have odor.

As for the distinctive fragrances of natural landscapes, olfactory geography remains strikingly underdeveloped. People grow accustomed to the sites, sounds, and smells of their own homeplaces. Smells, in particular, tend to be taken for granted. When people move out of their familiar milieu, they may be rudely shocked by novelty and intensely miss the sensory worlds they have left behind. To hunter-gatherers of the tropical rain forest, the steppe seems barren and hostile not only because of its vast horizon but also because it is far less odoriferous. Hawaiians reportedly miss the pungency of their islands when they visit the mainland’s less aromatic Midwest, and Midwesterners may feel overcome by tropical scents when they arrive in Hawaii.

Scents capture the aesthetic-emotional quality of place. In middle-latitude deciduous forests, it may be the smell of spring, understood as the smell of life; in the boreal forests, the smell of pine needles and fir cones; in certain parts of the Great Plains, the fragrance of sage; in New Mexico, piñon and juniper basking in the hot sun; in Australia, eucalyptus; on sea coasts, cool ozone-tinted air with a whiff of seaweed; in hot deserts, the slightly acid odor of intensely heated soil and rock; and so on. People who speak of preserving natural landscapes usually have only their visual character in mind. Yet not only a silhouette but an aroma is destroyed when an old deciduous forest is chopped down and replaced by fast-growing conifers. An olfactory geography does not come naturally to us. For this reason, when we have learned to appreciate nature’s extraordinary range of aromas and are ready to write an olfactory geography, we will have demonstrated a higher level of aesthetic sophistication.