



## The Chimeric Element In Perception: A First Exploration

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### *Preamble*

There are certain natural events that engender an aesthetic experience by fracturing the visual field into a great many fragmentary parts. They cause the objects of our perception to combine and recombine the way reality does in a dream, only faster. These experiences include: the thousand pinpricks of sunlight puncturing a leafy canopy of trees; the trembling of aspen leaves in the wind; the shedding of those leaves in the fall; the curtains of a snow-storm; the refractive play of sunlight on the surface of a lake; the spines of blossoms arcing overhead in a bower of cherry trees; the thousand raindrops rushing towards the ground; and the play of those same raindrops on the surface of a pond, where they form maps of ripple and shadow.

This experience is often a catalyst for the imagination. Confronted with a windswept tangle of foliage, we are halfway to assuming a bird of paradise—or a tiger, or a wolf—hiding underneath. Confronted with the scattered veil of a rainstorm or blizzard, we wait on demons or ghosts.

The intention of this essay is to suggest the possibility that such perceptual fragmentation and recombination might constitute a distinct aesthetic and epistemic category, associated with wonder, the fearful, the imaginary and the dream-like (and more specifically, with the intermediary stage between waking and sleeping known as hypnagogia, whose unusual properties have been related in the work of Elaine Scarry, among others). The mountain is Kant's model for the sublime, the flower is his exemplum for the beautiful. But the juxtaposed and combinatory is an aesthetic experience that fits neither of these well. I propose another category and another emblem to describe the experience of perception fractured and rearranged, an experience that has confronted our species in nature since the beginning of time,

and which has been carried forward and re-imagined in myth and artifact through monstrous gods, hieroglyphs, cathedrals, and cubist paintings. The category shall be the *chimeric*; its temporary emblem shall be the *tree in leaf*.

Why use the term chimeric when it already possesses two distinct meanings? The answer lies in what both meanings imply. The first meaning is a monster whose body is assembled from the bodies of other creatures. In the narrowest mythological context of the word, *chimera* means the creature that Bellerophon slew, a nasty, fire-breathing she-beast with a lion's head, a goat's body, and a serpent's tail. But even in this earliest myth, the tendency of the chimera to bleed out beyond its boundaries is clear, for Bellerophon rides Pegasus, the horse with wings, and becomes himself part of a heroic chimera made of man, stallion, and swan.

The second meaning of this word arises figuratively from the clearly counterfactual nature of the first: a chimera is also a mirage or desire that deludes a person but has no substantial reality.

Hume and Locke (and other philosophers after them) regularly use the Pegasus (and, by extension, chimeras in general) as an elemental example of the transition between the cognitive state of perception and that of imagination. A person sees a horse, and then sees a bird; later, he manipulates the images of bird and horse and melds them together. Thus something nonexistent is born from the extant. In other words, one additional concept that has for a long time been denoted by *chimeric* is the transition between perception and imagination (and also the transition between reason and belief: Lucretius, for example, was horrified to think that no one ever stopped to consider that the chimera could not exist because the animals it contained—goat, lion, and snake—aged at different speeds, to say nothing of the havoc fire would wreak on the insides of a throat).

The chimeric, as Locke and Hume make clear in their use of the Pegasus, is a state that leads us from the plane of perception to the plane of imagination, from empiricism to phantasm. It is a threshold experience.

In what follows I will consider the following hypothesis: if primitive combinations of perceived objects constitute the first step across the threshold from perception to imagination, then the fragmenting of visual experience is the doorway that must open for that step to be

taken. Thus, when a snow-storm fractures the surface of the world, demons and fairies seem to arise; when dense vegetation blankets our sight, every rustle is possibly a living thing; when humans look up into the starry sky, monsters and heroes (among them Pegasus himself) crystallize. The tree in leaf is not a chimera, but it is *chimeric*, because it is one example of the moment when an experience in the perceivable world allows the mind, through the fracturing of the visual realm, to reach toward the first rungs of the unseen and to the animate.

In what follows I wish to list some examples of common experiences of this chimeric flickering and fracturing. Some of these experiences will engender a sense of the wondrous and some are closer to the terrible, but all are linked to the workings of the imagination. The list is by no means exhaustive, but I hope it will serve as a toehold for further inquiry, the first branch upon which we alight.

### *Some Examples of the Chimeric Event Having to Do with Trees*

Perhaps the easiest emblem, among trees, for this experience of quaking, refracting, re-configuring (the words play slip-and-slide because the terminology is still indeterminate), is the aspen. It is *populus tremula* in Europe; its sister species in America, often called the quaking aspen, is *populus tremuloides*. Its leaves are prone to a delicate but pronounced trembling when shaken by even a faint wind. This seems to be due to the flattened petiole or leafstalk that attaches each leaf to its stem: the structural flimsiness of this thin finger of branch causes each leaf to twist in the breeze, highly responsive to any stimulus. A difference in the coloration between the dorsal and ventral sides of the leaves creates a striking alternation as each leaf rotates up and down. Because one side is much more reflective, the effect is like that of a signal-mirror being rapidly flicked in and out of the sun. Staring too long at quaking aspens can induce a nearly hypnotic state—any search for a stable pattern is constantly disrupted by the shaking, and on a bright day the quicksilver flashes of light can have the cumulative effect of a flash-bulb.

The aspen is perhaps the most striking example of this phenomenon among leafy trees, but certainly not the only one. To varying degrees

all dense or expansive forms of vegetal life adhere to this model. The deciduous trees each have a distinctively shaped leaf whose formal properties, when seen in aggregate, create a not-quite-stable tessellation of figures, as if a mosaic of identical tiles were broken up and scattered over the ground. The field maple leaf has three jagged and narrow daggers; the horse chestnut leaf is a drooping, seven-fingered hand; the oak leaf has many uneven serrations, like an archaic knife.

But it is not only the leaves themselves that engender this sensation: the blossoms on a tree also send the eye spinning, first over each whorl, and then to each petal folded within. This becomes even more pronounced when the petals begin to fall in the midst of a windy spring day, as is beautifully captured in Ansel Adams's famous photograph of loose dogwood petals floating like smoke over a Yosemite canyon.

Nor is this phenomenon limited to the broad-leafed trees and their flowers. The ginkgo's thick-armed branches carry dense clusters of fan-shaped leaves, which, true to their form, flap up and down and throw off whimsical shadows. The conifers reproduce the sensation of a surface broken into many alternating pieces at a still more minute scale, as each needle, formed into sprays or arms or radiating hemispheres, takes on the fracturing and flickering qualities we have already described in all of the trees above.

One final instance of this phenomenon among trees—possibly the most important—occurs not so much on them as around and between them. This is the movement of light through vegetation, which is the experience I myself most associate with the chimeric. I grew up in a house on a hill in a redwood forest north of San Francisco. The redwoods—*sequoia sempervirens*, the world's tallest tree—towered over the house, and blocked any direct sunlight until well towards noon. In the mornings, I would open the slatted wooden blinds of my bedroom window and investigate the state of the day by trying to make out just how many and how bright were the needles of light that had managed to penetrate the weave of branches. I would make an inference about the coming strength of the midday sunlight (or the thickness of cloud cover) by the brilliance and hue of these pinpricks. It became a well-honed skill, which was compounded by a kind of parallax, achieved when, half an hour later, I walked out the front door with my father in order to get into his car and be driven to school. The car was parked underneath an overhanging deck of the house; below

the deck you could see a patch of forest. In it I looked for several more patches of light—one quite large, towards the center, and five or six smaller around it—to compare the speed and magnitude with which the day seemed to brighten. Watching the beveled sunlight work its way through the trees became a regular exercise for me, and I could guess with some accuracy exactly how bright and hot the day was going to be.

This is perhaps not such an unusual mental act. Nevertheless, I was reminded of its importance in my early life when one day I sat down in a green metal chair in the Jardin du Luxembourg in Paris beneath two adjacent rows of chestnut trees on a spring day. I looked up and saw the light rushing towards me in a warren of capillaries; it descended furiously like so many birds through the gates of a grand aviary. The aviary itself, when I tried to imagine it, seemed to rise in the air above the trees, with towers and domes of wire, until it simply dissolved into the brilliance of the sun. This vision struck me distinctly as being somehow like the sunlight predictions I used to make. From those verdant peepholes I once again conjured in my imagination the sun stretching over the sky, a sight that would have blinded me if seen straight on. If it wasn't so banal, I would be tempted to say it had something of the religious about it, for in glimpsing the light through numerous narrow gaps in the canopy between earth and sky, I was able to prophesy a picture of the heavens.

*Other More or Less Modest Examples  
of the Supernatural and Religious  
Associated with the Chimeric*

John Muir encountered something not unlike these shivers of aesthetic cognition while looking up through a canopy of giant ferns in the Sierra Nevada Mountains:

The broad-shouldered fronds held high on smooth stout stalks growing close together, overleaning and overlapping, make a complete ceiling, beneath which one may walk erect over several acres without being seen, as if beneath a roof. And how soft and lovely the light streaming through this living ceiling, revealing the arching branching ribs and veins of the fronds as the framework of

countless panes of pale green and yellow plant-grass nicely fitted together—a fairytale created out of the commonest fern-stuff.

Muir's account has at least two important and distinctive features: first, that the thousands of interlocking fern-fronds and the light streaming into them imply some kind of continuous structure even though they are broken up—a roof, a ceiling, panes of green and yellow grass. The little bits suggest something bigger. And, second, that something bigger is a fairytale, that is, it is hyper-animate in the way commonly attributed to spirits. It glows with more-than-human life.

Muir describes something similar when he tells of crossing on foot the lip of the roaring Yosemite falls. There are comet-tails of water shooting into the air, and he is so fascinated by the streams of water that they invade his dreams. "Again and again I dreamed I was rushing through the air above a glorious avalanche of water and rocks." Once he even dreams that the mountain on which he is sleeping heaves itself over an unknown precipice. As different as this experience is from the gentle fern fantasy, it has some similarities: instead of streams of light, there are now streams of water; instead of watching them, Muir is a part of them, carried on the back of a storming comet. And if the ferns and light seem to build a great cathedral, then the waterfall seems to tear it down in one swoop—the water in Muir's dreams picks up a great glacial edifice and throws it down an imagined cliff.

But even waterfalls are not the limit case for this scattered, spraying perception and its phantom powers. In many fairytales, a crystalline winter curtain gives rise to demons and witches and previously unimaginable beings. Snow is like a second forest descending over the world. It flattens our perception into screens of broken bits of white, and, as mountains of imaginative literature suggest, easily summons the fantastical.

It is out of a blizzard that the almost-otherworldly villain Pugachev arises in Pushkin's short story "The Captain's Daughter." The Russian poet returns to the world-reshaping quality of a snowstorm again in *Eugene Onegin* when he makes a snow-drowned landscape the setting for his heroine Tatyana's monstrous and sensual dream. That snowstorms imply a hidden animate presence is made clear by the nearly universal myth of the snow-maiden, a creature who simply steps out from behind a curtain of white to play with other children or to court

suitors. In Hawthorne's version of this story, the aliveness of the snow-maiden is compounded by a whirl of snowflakes that transform into snow-birds and flutter happily at the frozen girl's fingertips.

In Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen," possibly the greatest set of variations on the theme of the chimeric ever written, the snow takes on an almost impossible number of shapes. Some are exquisite:

It was snowing gently; one of the flakes fell on the edge of the wooden box and stayed there; other snowflakes followed and they grew until they took the shape of a woman. Her clothes looked like the whitest gauze. It was made of millions of little star-shaped snowflakes. She was beautiful but made of ice: cold, blinding, glittering ice; and yet she was alive, for her eyes stared at Kai like two stars, but neither rest nor peace was to be found in her gaze.

Some are comic:

the snowflakes grew bigger and bigger until they looked like white hens that were running alongside him.

Some are unmistakably menacing:

The snowflakes flew just above the snow-covered earth; and as they came nearer they grew in size. Gerda remembered how they had looked when seen through a magnifying glass, but these were even bigger and horrible to look at... And what strange creatures they were! Some of them looked like ugly little porcupines, others like bunches of snakes all twisted together, and some like little bears with bristly fur. All of the snowflakes were brilliantly white and terribly alive.

It is here that we begin to see clearly the import of the connotations that cling obstinately to the word *chimeric*. The maelstrom, the shaking branch, the blizzard—these places are breeding grounds for monsters, angels, and elves. Chimeric perception involves the scattering of the visible surface, the imputation of some entity or whole beyond the boundaries of perception, and, finally, the suspicion that there is something alive amid many things that are not themselves living.

Yukio Mishima went so far as to name a novel after this experience.

The hero of *Spring Snow* takes a rickshaw ride with Satoko, a woman he loves thanks to an inward-facing obsession with danger and vanity. The snow falls heavily during the ride and the rickshaw passes an empty parade ground:

Suddenly Kiyooki had the illusion of seeing a huge mass of troops drawn up, just as in the familiar picture of the memorial ceremony near Tokuri Temple for the fallen of the Russo-Japanese War. With bowed heads, thousands of soldiers stood in groups around a white wood cenotaph and an altar covered with white cloths that were blowing in the wind. This scene differed from the photo only insofar as the soldiers' shoulders were covered with snow and the visors of their caps had turned white. The moment he saw these phantoms, Kiyooki understood that they had all died in battle. The thousands of troops below had massed not only to pray for fallen comrades but to mourn their own lives as well.

Not unlike a haunting dream, the snowstorm brings the dead to life and collapses time. There is finality in the snowstorm and, by way of finality itself, a glimpse into the eternal. The dead are massed as tokens of mortality and standard-bearers for some kind of eternity. But in the next moment the phantoms disappear, swept away by the snow, and new scenes replace them as the rickshaw rushes on through the storm.

Mishima contributes a further quality to the chimeric: its configurations are ephemeral, but the template itself (the snow falling over the landscape, the branches waving in place) endures, such that there is the distinct suggestion of a powerful continuity over interruption.

Mishima's pessimistic Buddhism, which conceives of life itself as a series of ephemeral stains upon an eternal, white template, is much concerned with the chimeric. Its first great exposition in *Spring Snow* occurs when a party of aristocrats are horrified to discover while walking through a park that a dead dog has become trapped at the top of a waterfall, blocking the constant rush of water. A Buddhist Abbess expounds the doctrine of Hosso Buddhism in a funeral prayer for the dog: that existence is itself only a matter of subjective awareness, that the horror of the party is one scattered perception among many, rushing down an unending waterfall.

Again and again in Mishima's novel, the chimeric serves as the tran-



sition from the illusory fullness of perceived experience to celestial emptiness. As here, during the cherry blossom festival:

They hung in huge clusters from the black austerity of the branches like a mass of white seashells spread over a reef. The evening wind made the curtains billow along the path, and when it caught the tips of the branches, they bent gracefully in a rustle of blossoms. Then the great, wide-spread branches themselves began to sway with an easy grandeur under their weight of white. The pallor of the flowers was tinged here and there by pink clusters of buds. And with almost invisible subtlety, the star-shaped center of each blossom was marked with pink in tiny, sharp strokes, like the stitches holding a button in place.

The sky had darkened, and the outline of the clouds began to blur as they merged into it, and the blossoms themselves, already turned into a single mass, began to lose their distinctive coloring for a shade that was almost indistinguishable from that of the evening sky.

Or, again, on a road leading to the Abbess's monastery at Gesshu:

The screen of slender pines and cedars that formed a backdrop to the maples was not thick enough to shut out the broad, bright expanse of sky. Its brilliance flooded through them, striking the maples from behind and turning their extended red-leaved branches to scattered clouds caught in the radiance of the morning sun. As she looked up at the sky from beneath the branches, she admired the subtly delicate way the leaves were interwoven, and imagined that she was seeing the heavens through a tracery of deep scarlet.

The metaphoric exuberance of Mishima's writing is not at all gratuitous. It is the very essence of the chimeric that it be protean. At each touch of the wind, a half-formed reality comes into being, a mass of sea shells or fold of scarlet cloth, and this reality becomes almost interchangeable with the perceived experience of blossoms or cedar needles.

Nor is the role it plays as a gateway for metaphor the endpoint of the chimeric. In fact, the chimeric is revealed in Mishima's novels to be the very image of human suffering when set against the backdrop

of eternity. It is the transition from the finite to the infinite. The Abbess of Gesshu explains late in *Spring Snow* that consciousness and the entire train of causality that gives rise to it is created in each moment, and then annihilated, only to be re-constituted in the next instant, like a series of dots that, when seen from afar, imply a line. The listener, the university student Honda, is distraught at the recent death of his beloved friend Kiyooki, and fails to realize "with what clarity the Abbess's words were illuminating Kiyooki's fate as well as his own, though on the face of it they might seem remote and irrelevant." Mishima concretizes this exchange between enlightenment and ignorance with yet another chimeric metaphor: "It was just the same way that the moon, at its zenith, subtly lights up the dark waters of a lake."

Meanwhile, in the Snow Queen's icy palace, Hans Christian Andersen's kidnapped hero Kai plays the "Game of Reason" at the feet of the woman who has abducted him. In this game, he arranges and rearranges shattered fragments of ice: "He wanted to put the pieces of ice together in such a way that they formed a certain word, but he could not remember exactly what that word was. The word that he could not remember was 'eternity.'"

### *Possible Cognitive Origins of Two Salient Features of the Chimeric*

I have so far made the claim that a certain subset of perceptual experiences (shorthand: a mass of leaves, a snowstorm, pounding rain, rushing water, a blossoming tree) deserve to be considered as belonging to a specific aesthetic category, which I have called the chimeric. These experiences are united by the way they break up the perceptual surface into many tiny bits, and the way those bits tend to regularly move or at least give off the appearance of moving (as with the pulsing of stars). I have called it the chimeric on four grounds: (1) that it seems to disrupt the normal flow of perception and push it towards fantasy or reverie, (2) that this fantasy tends toward concatenation and juxtaposition, creating imaginary or fantastical images of porcupines, snakes, sea-shells, or phantom soldiers all dressed in white, (3) that these concatenations and juxtapositions lead us to posit the existence

of something other than what it is that we are perceiving, and (4) that we often impute a state of aliveness to this something-other.

Many questions remain to be answered. One of the most important: is the link between the very quotidian act of seeing a tree in leaf or a rainstorm and the flights of the imagination really so direct? No doubt many people regularly pass by a bush or witness a snowstorm without suffering any interference in their daily lives from fairies, goddesses, ice porcupines or the cosmic emptiness of Hosso Buddhism.

In order to answer this question, we must try to establish whether there may be some methods of describing this experience that do not rely so completely on the vocabulary of the imaginary. That is, we must determine whether it is possible to look at this phenomenon not from the endpoint of fantasy, but from the starting point of perception.

One such place to start is in the nature of the images that are retained by the mind during the process of perception. The classic psychological study addressing this problem is George Sperling's "The Information Available in Brief Visual Presentations." This is the touchstone experiment for one (empirical) understanding of the difference between the initial act of perception and the conscious processing of that act.

Sperling used a tachistoscope—an illuminated screen that exposes the eye to images for brief and consistent intervals of time—to show his test subjects groupings of between three and twelve numbers and letters, placed in one to three rows of between three and six characters, like this:

RNF	KLB	
	VNX	
XVNBH	XMRJ	71VF
	PNKP	XL53
		B4W7
LQDKKJ	TDR	
	SRN	
	FZR	
ZYVVFF		

Once the image had vanished after a matter of milliseconds, Sperling asked his subjects to record to the best of their abilities the charac-

ters they had seen and their positions in each matrix. He found that, regardless of the number of symbols presented to the subject in any given test, the maximum number of them that could accurately be retained held relatively constant (it was, in most cases, four or five, depending on the subject). In other words, regardless of whether subjects were shown four letters or twelve, on average they were only able to remember four accurately.

But a further experiment showed surprising results. Subjects were asked to focus on recalling the letters and numbers present in only one row of the stimulus—but they were informed which row only milliseconds before the image was flashed. They were made to understand that a tone would be played just before the image was shown, and depending on whether the pitch was high or low they would be asked to focus on the top, middle, or bottom rows of the stimulus. Subjects were not told beforehand which part of the stimulus they were supposed to focus on; they only learned this as the tone was played, less than a half-second before the slide appeared. Nevertheless, their accuracy improved dramatically. They were able—at least in the moments immediately following exposure to the stimulus—to draw upon more information than the immediate memory span would have made possible. Their accuracy over a series of trials with a three by three by three matrix was 90 percent when accompanied by the instruction to focus on only one part of the stimulus—much higher than when they were asked to focus on the entire matrix. Sperling concluded that although immediate memory has only a four to five symbol capacity, the amount actually available for examination immediately following exposure to the image was actually closer to 90 percent of nine, that is to say, slightly more than eight symbols.

In other words, the afterimage of perception—perhaps more clearly put, the amount of information the outside world can imprint upon the human perceptual apparatus at a given time—is much higher than the human capacity for recall and manipulation of that information. Sperling postulated that this was because a full picture of what we perceive appears complete in the mind as an afterimage to our perception for only a split-second before vanishing.

It is thus the case that we perceive far more than we consciously know, and that we access what we perceive consciously by breaking it into smaller component parts. This undoubtedly applies most espe-

cially to situations in which the visual field is crowded with stimuli: for example, the night sky. To try to absorb the entire night sky in one look is an act of perceptual suicide. The result is a vertiginous (although not altogether displeasing) loss of orientation. To attempt to see at once and consciously the entire night sky in any moment is almost the same as seeing nothing at all. The millions of stars cannot be hoarded by even the most avaricious pair of human eyes.

Instead, a person looking at the night sky will (at first unconsciously) break up the sky into distinct portions, rationing his perception. He will pay attention to the dense mass of stars in one quadrant of the heavens before moving on to another. And even within each quadrant, he will isolate certain stars, perhaps by virtue of their brightness, and perhaps because taken together they suggest a recognizable form or shape. Because the night sky changes rarely over the millennia, human cultures codify these recognizable forms, so that each time a person looks at the night sky, he is not obligated to invent a new system for parceling out his perception of it. In searching for the constellations when we lift our eyes to the night sky, we pre-empt the chimeric, as the perceptual triage has taken place before the perceptual act itself.

But if we imagine what it might be like to lift one's eyes to a sky with foreign stars (as is the case for a visitor to the southern hemisphere) and try to gain our perceptual bearing by identifying patterns and figures, then we begin to approach an experience that makes unusually evident the act of focusing our perceptual attention. When a person looks up into a mass of snowflakes or into a foreign sky, the vast number of discrete bits make suddenly more obvious the act of perceptual triage—these acts lift into consciousness the process by which the image of the world is subdivided into coherent shapes and forms.

The registering of the outside world on the human eye can be likened to a swift river: it flows into our minds with considerable speed and volume, and consciousness can only lift a bucketful of water from the rushing current. Under normal circumstances, the water that is captured in the bucket is as much as we see of the river. We are led to believe that the entirety of the world in our immediate purview is that captured by our perception. But certain experiences—those during which this river is suddenly rent into thousands of individual droplets by rapids or a sudden drop over a cliff—give us an intimation, however partial, of a perceptual experience beyond what we can

normally process. They give some sense, however incomplete, of the actual size of the river.

Because the limits to conscious perception in relation to the experience of perception remain roughly constant, the imagination comes into play. Faced with numerous stimuli shifting positions, re-grouping or re-forming, the mind imputes increasingly stranger forms to them.

All of this, of course, requires that a person open up his or her perception to the possibilities of vastness and mutability that these chimeric experiences proffer. One can look at a tree and easily resist the temptation to become lost in its mass of leaves or blossoms, just as one can look up to the night sky and see only Orion's skeletal form amid the billions of stars (as I have said already: this experience can be *pre-empted* by the force of perceptual habit, by thinking, *I know what a tree looks like already; I have a map of the night-sky*).

But there is one category of experience that may force any person (and not just any *person*, as we will shortly see) into an act of chimeric perception. When there is violent and unexpected movement at hand, the temptation to imagine a shape among the shaking trees or tumbling rain is extremely powerful. The kinds of movements we have been describing are, in at least many instances, inextricable from an ancient impulse, shared by humans and many of their evolutionary ancestors, toward ascribing agency to the external world.

Nothing suggests aliveness as vividly as movement. A classic experiment by the psychologists Heider and Simmel found that subjects gave elaborate, anthropomorphic explanations of a film they had seen featuring a series of quickly moving geometric shapes (*the triangle is in love with the square, and the second triangle is the villain trying to keep them apart...*). The psychologist Justin Barrett speaks of a *hyper-active agency detection device* in the human mind; the mimetic impulse and pathetic fallacy are older terms for the same process. The evolutionary advantage to imputing life-likeness to a sudden inexplicable movement is obvious—it is much better to err on the side of imagining a lion hiding in the bushes than to dismiss a mysterious shaking as the wind. The possible implications of this eager ascription of agency to the surrounding world for the origins of animistic religions have been much discussed in recent years—and, in slightly different vocabularies, for centuries before.

But most important for our purposes here, few things stimulate the attention as powerfully as the unconfirmed possibility of another living thing. In *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Darwin describes the perfect gradient that exists in a horse (and by extension, all mammals) between a "mere glance at some unexpected object, with a momentary doubt whether it is dangerous, to a jump so rapid and violent, that the animal could not consciously whirl round in so rapid a manner." Examining the surroundings for living things (and deciding whether those things are dangerous or not) is the threshold between conscious experience and primitive reflex, between awareness and impulse.

Darwin writes elsewhere in the same book of the astonishment experienced by monkeys at the London Zoo when a turtle was placed in their cage. The status of the turtle seemed perplexing to the monkeys. Their eyes widened ("we naturally desire, when startled, to perceive the case as quickly as possible") and their ears pricked up, and they raised themselves up on their hind legs to get a better look at it. One monkey even "moved its lips in an odd, rapid, jabbering manner, which the keeper declared was meant to conciliate or please the turtle." Is it friend or foe, alive or dead, thing or being? The uncertainty put the monkeys into a state of heightened attention, opened wider their senses, prepared them, it seemed, for inferences like the thought that the turtle might be a being in need of pleasing. In contrast, when a snake was placed in the monkeys' cage, its distinctive slither sent them into a state of immediate terror, allowing no time for the wary intellectual evaluation that a slow-moving turtle in their midst had produced.

The tendency of fragmentary or hazy perceptions to coalesce into living beings is succinctly captured in yet another literary example: In *The Temple of Dawn*, a sequel to *Spring Snow*, Mishima reproduces an ancient story about two beautiful women who are seen dancing in the air above the peak of Mt. Fuji. "Frequently a quiet wind at the sloping foot of the mountain would develop into a strong gale at the top, carrying a mist of snow into the blue sky," he explains in the voice of the sometime-skeptic Honda, "It was probably this snow dust that had appeared in the form of two beautiful women to the inhabitants' eyes."

## *Adaptations of the Chimeric in Sacred Architecture*

The chimeric is not only experienced by persons in the act of perceiving the natural world. It is also consciously reproduced in art in order (among other reasons) to replicate the remarkable invitation it extends to the perceiver to reach for the unseen and the fantastical. Examples abound: the sensual representations of the starry sky in Van Gogh, of the forest in Corot, of the dense garden of Giverny by Monet. The delightful scattering of light by precious stones might be another example, to say nothing of the mesmerizing effects of the kaleidoscope, or colored by a different emotional hue, the dark and stormy nights that set the stage for so many works of folklore and fiction.

I wish to close this essay by looking at another example that might seem at once less recognizable than these others, and yet is in some sense closer to the original. It is an example that attempts to re-create not only a patch of the chimeric within the discrete space of a canvas or diadem, but rather to reproduce an entire environment of chimeric shapes and forms. This example is the vegetal ornamentation in some European sacred architecture.

Sacred architecture has made use of vegetal motifs from at least the separation of the waters. In Egypt and Assyria, the capitals of temple columns were based on lotus flowers and palmate leaves. The earliest surviving instance in Greek architecture of the Corinthian order, with its distinctive capital modeled on cresting acanthus leaves, is to be found in the temple of Apollo Epikourios at Bassae, built at the end of the fifth century BC. In this temple there stood exactly one Corinthian column, at the center of the Naos, just before the statue of the temple's tutelary deity. All around were the austere geometric forms of Doric columns; this acanthus tracery alone faced Apollo, as if it were also an object of devotion.

But the flowering of vegetal forms in the sacred architecture of the European Middle Ages is almost without precedent. Walk into almost any church in western Europe built between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries (and into many built in the two centuries before), and let your eyes adjust to the darkness and the uniform color of the stone: the walls and columns and ceilings, you will eventu-



ally perceive, are overrun with vegetal forms hewn from stone and wood, or painted across the surfaces. Sometimes these forms appear as a dense proliferation of leaves on the capitals, other times they are a mass of branch-like work crawling up columns and walls, or they are clusters of leaves and flowers carved into wooden choir stalls and altar baldachins. In still more extreme examples, the vegetal appears in a great arboreal mass arcing over the entire nave. Goethe finally opened his eyes to the beauty of medieval architecture (having been raised to think it heavy and disproportionate) when he realized that the cathedral of Strasbourg was in fact intended to resemble a great tree of God, with “a thousand boughs, a million branches and leaves like sand by the sea.”

The cathedral of Reims is one of the finest instances among these petrified groves (*tu es petrus*, but you are also the laborers in the vineyard and the lilies of the field). Its immense vault and sprawling polygonal columns call to mind the solemn airiness of a forest, but the vegetal qualities are present above all in the ornamentation of the immense capitals, as well as in the stone vines decorating the interior west façade. The scholar Liselotte Behling has shown that vegetal imagery was used to decorate the cathedral across almost the entire century of its construction, under the supervision of at least three of its five master-builders. The number of species of plants represented by the massed leaves and blossoms at Reims echoes the full diversity of forest ecology: oak, rue, laurel, ivy, waterlily, rose, maple, mugwort, fig, and clover, in addition to many other more abstracted arboreal designs that cannot be identified as a single species. These variations on the plant motif sometimes appear individually—as in a single capital wrapped with many feet of stone oak-leaf—or sometimes bound up together, as in one panel where arrowhead, waterlily, and oak twist together.

There is a complex symbology behind this stone arboretum. The waterlily was said to cure certain diseases, as was rue. The rose was an emblem of the Virgin, the laurel a symbol of glory, the fig of modesty. A waterlily sits above a statue of St. John the Baptist, perhaps intended to call to mind the river Jordan (although Behling notices that the actual baptism, depicted elsewhere in the church, is surrounded by a border of rue). Heaven is likened to a vegetal paradise and Mary to the enclosed garden, protecting its purity.

But all is not iconographic in cathedrals. There is also a proud commitment to realism. The streaming light of stained glass windows and the curling vegetation re-create with care the riparian forests and fields of Champagne, with grapevines, oak leaves, and overhanging ivy predominating. Liselotte Behling recalls visiting a little village church in the nearby town of Villers-aux-noeds in the spring of 1959 and finding the altar draped with real ivy. She wonders, might the living article have complemented its stone counterpart during solemn ceremonies at the cathedral as well? Stone foliage does not tremble and shake like real vegetation, but the careful circulation of light and shadow in the interior spaces of a cathedral, along with the intricacy of the ornamentation, gives off a labile sensation, like a forest about to rustle in the wind.

Reims is one of the earliest instances of an enthusiasm for vegetal design in European churches that lasted well into the Renaissance. The center of this movement was southern Germany, although it flourished in France and Italy as well. There are distinct historical causes for this waxing interest in the vegetal, and they are documented with great care by the German art historians Carl Oettinger and Hans Sedlmayr. The old Germanic word "Laube" became the operative architectural term of this vegetal moment. Originally meaning a roof to shelter cattle, and later indicating a balcony encircling the upper level of a farmhouse (of the kind still seen in traditional Tyrolian chalets), in the high middle ages the *Laube* came to mean a tabernacle, or a shelter for the sacred.

But it remained, as Carl Oettinger explains, true to its etymology in that it was always a partial shelter, open on one side so that the faithful might access the presence within—a saint, a reliquary, an altar, or, most frequently, a statue of the Virgin. Gradually this half-building became conflated with a half-forest—a garden—and eventually with the forest itself. The Marian cult that dominates the late Middle Ages is rich in garden imagery. Heaven is no longer thought of as a golden fortress ruled by the militant God-Father. Instead, it is a celestial garden with Mary as its beneficent monarch. This heaven contains the arbor, the tree of life, and the fountain from which spring the rivers of paradise.

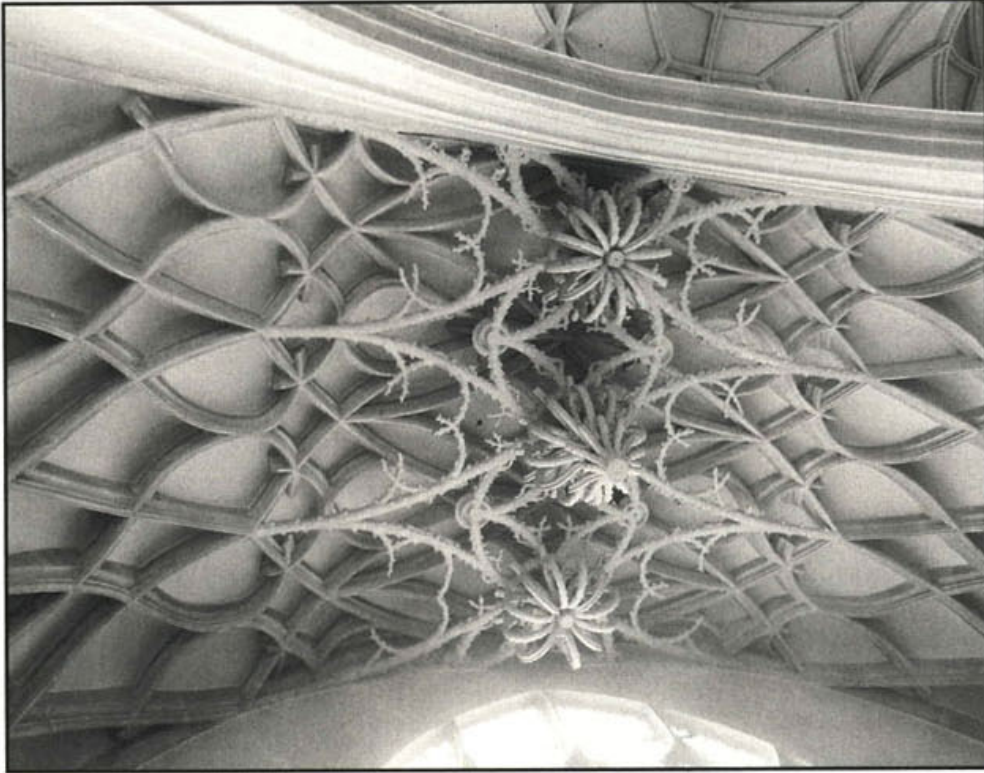
At the turn of the sixteenth century, the arrival of the Renaissance in Germany turned the gardens feral. Young German humanists read

Tacitus and discovered in his tribute to the wild German forest an early image of their emerging national self-awareness. Painting and church architecture followed, growing ever more tangled, especially as craftsmen sought to differentiate the German style from the encroaching geometric elegance of the Italian. In turn this interest in the woods faded away, replaced by a fascination with the arabesques and smelted starlight of the Baroque and Rococo. It would be resurrected only in the nineteenth century.

But the historical waxing and waning of these aesthetic and political ideals cannot account for all the qualities of the vegetal phenomenon in sacred architecture. It is too widespread in time and space and, more importantly, its effect upon human consciousness is too obvious, if difficult to describe. Seeing the unseen, inducing the presence of the mystical—these have always and everywhere been the intentions of sacred architects, especially in the European Middle Ages in the years before the Reformation, when the sensual realm and the sacred realm were not forcibly divorced as they later would be. The re-creation of the dense patterns made by foliage—and the sense of aliveness that these patterns suggest—may have been built on a foundation of ideas, but the blueprints were certain inescapable patterns in human consciousness.

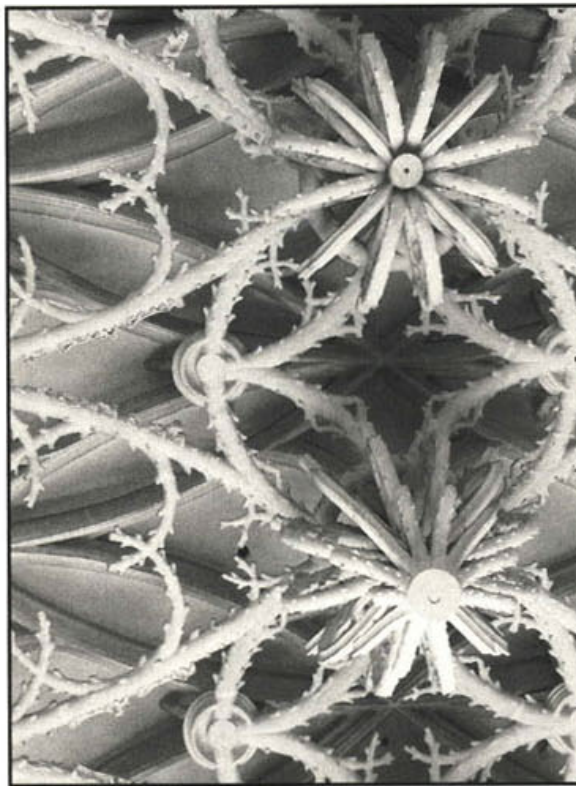
The scattering effect of leaves is practiced on a modest scale in intricate capitals, such as the ones that decorate the cloister at Neuburg Monastery in the Vienna Woods, bearing grapevine, holly, linden, arrowhead, plane, oak. It too is replicated, again modestly, by the oak-leaf ornamentation of the choir at the cathedral in Konstanz, and more grandly by the twenty-foot-tall carved oak tree in full leaf upon which Jesus is crucified on the high altar of the monastery of Zwettl in Lower Austria.

But the chimeric is given a much fuller treatment in the six spectacular side chapels of the cathedral of the Virgin in Ingolstadt. Immense vegetal forms hang from the chapel vaults, often in several layers: in one chapel, geometric ribs crisscross the ceiling; below them, a layer of flying ribs, decorated with thorny stubs to resemble branches, describe fragments of circles and ellipses; and hanging from them, three immense floral bulbs look ready to drop to the floor. Another chapel features a similar arrangement but centers on a circle and a single hanging rosette, while yet another has a slithering mass of vines

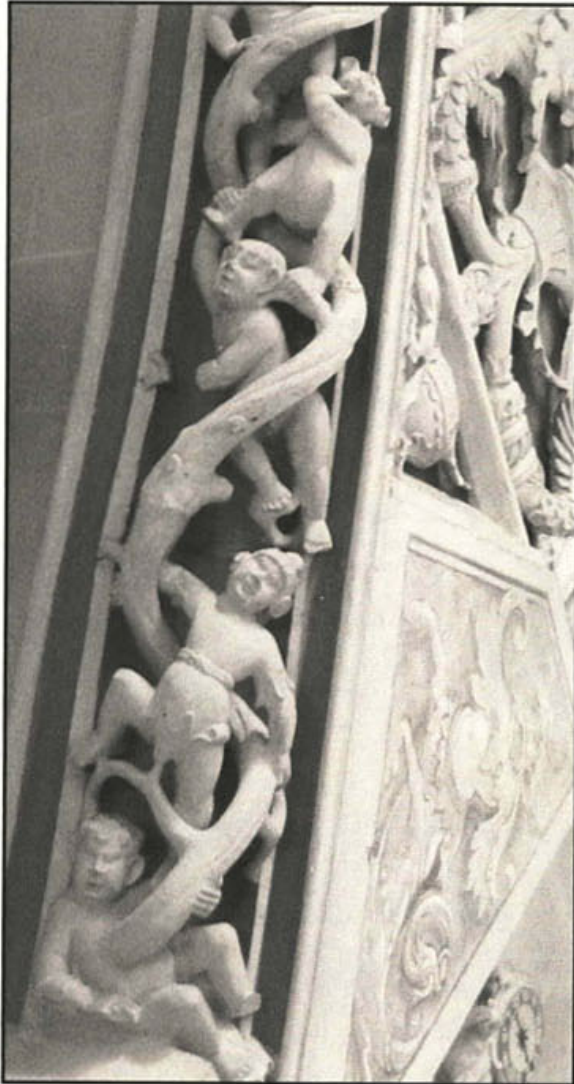


*Side Chapel at Ingolstadt Cathedral, Germany*

gathered together into three bulbs that terminate in what seem to be acorns. To look up to the heavens at Ingolstadt one must gaze through the tangled branches of an immense and complex canopy. Vision must alight on every branch and bulb and cancerous nub. These heavy-hanging flowers of the late Gothic make suddenly concrete and lucid one of John Muir's more mystical images of Yosemite, which



*Side Chapel at Ingolstadt (detail)*



*Organ Decoration, Konstanz Cathedral*

unfolds as he writes, "the whole landscape glows like a human face in the glory of enthusiasm, and the blue sky, pale around the horizon, bends peacefully down over all like one vast flower."

Many writers make monsters from the fairy-stuff of leaves and snowflakes, but the literary imagination is capricious and its content ever only imperfectly transmitted across a text. The sculptural imagination, on the other hand, fixes its traces in stone for other eyes to see and hands to feel, and for this reason the European tradition of covering the interiors of churches with leaves and branches provides one of the best records of the imaginative leap into aliveness that the

word *chimera* promises. Simply put: the stone forests of European churches are furiously alive with monsters. They proliferate madly and casually, utterly at home hiding behind a leaf or attached to an umbilical vine, as is the case for the demented babes who peek out from around the organ at the cathedral in Konstanz.

At Neuburg, the oldest decorations on the cloister, from the thirteenth century, display beasts gripping onto curling tendrils of vine. In the newest wing of the cloister, from the fourteenth, two faces, one lewdly vulpine, the other vacuously bovine, seem to have been born, like cabbage-patch kids, from the autoerotic congress of a leaf. In the Romanesque church of Ravello in southern Italy, a series of



*New Cloister Vault Ornament, Stiftkloster Neuburg*

crude Corinthian capitals are infested with beasts, among them birds squabbling with lizards, a lion trying to wrap his mouth all the way around the fat slippery cylinder of a serpent, two bulls who share the same head, and a pair of dragons feasting on acanthus leaves.

Even the chapels at Ingolstadt suggest something of the ominously or monstrously alive—they may indeed represent the heavenly garden, but as at least one scholar, Ethan Matt Kavaler, has claimed, they might also signify nature fallen and run amock from God's plan. It is the shivering instability of the decorative scheme that makes it feel alive; the knotted branches are like so many arms of a tangled spider making its way slowly from its web on the ceiling to the chapel floor.

There is a gleeful excitement and terrible fear bound up with the chimeric—we have seen glimpses of it already in Mishima and Hans Christian Andersen. It is the unanticipated presence of living things, the doubling and redoubling of creation, the imputation of generation and the invention of new and frightening genera to account for it. In this variant, the chimeric is akin to the vegetal habitat of demons

on the margins of medieval manuscripts and in the paintings of Hieronymous Bosch. In the more leisurely grotesqueries of the later humanist era, much of the violence of these depictions is tamed, the fear transformed into amusement. But even in such drolleries as the ceiling of the pleasure-house Villa Lante at Bagnaia, chimeras live amid scrolling plant stalks as naturally as insects.

In the Renaissance chapel commissioned by Margherita Pellegrini and built by Michele Sammichele in the monastery of San Bernardino in Verona, a series of vertical reliefs with vegetal forms adorn the walls. Their model seems to have been individual strands of creeper, running up the marble surface in distinct bands. The chapel's larger structure is an austere piece of Italian geometry, and so the vegetal presence is necessarily more circumspect. The chimeric effect is hardly achieved at all unless a visitor to the chapel removes his eyes from the dome above or the altar in front, and brings them to rest directly on the reliefs, preferably at a distance of less than a foot. But such an action must have been intended by the craftsmen, even if it was only



*Vegetal Satyress, Pellegrini Chapel*

a sly insertion intended for easily distracted visitors. For, seen up close, these vines are a carnival of animals. Creatures, often twinned in fearful symmetry, crawl their way up the panels, sprouting from stalks or vomiting flowers. A satyress, the smooth, taut circles of her breasts and stomach exposed above her shaggy thighs, squats on a trunk rising from the calyx of a flower. Her loin-cloth resembles the narrow spathe of a calla lily, and her androgynous face has an angelic vacancy of expression. Thick ferns sprout

from her muscled shoulders in place of arms. Two runted fernlets curl downwards and in, towards her chest, while two larger ferns spring above her head to form a double perch for two birds of prey. These same upper ferns also release narrow stalks; decorated with cordiform leaves, these stalks reach further up the relief towards yet other monsters.

Serpent women, gnashing porpoises, rams with laurel-leaf bodies crowd the narrow spaces. At the base of one panel is a splendid, fragmentary horse, out of whose shattered but still muscular backside there



*Sea-horse, Pellegrini Chapel*

grows a thick stalk with lobed leaves. The stallion rises from a turbulent current, and his front legs taper into what seem to be flukes. He is the living bridge between two chimeric sites, the garden and the sea. Even the hair of his mane twirls up into arabesques. He has twisted his head backward, and his body writhes from the torque of its wound-up neck. This tension is a model of the temporary animation flickering among the inanimate elements of the chimeric—the water stirs and thrashes until it spasms into sentient life, and then that sentient life form just as quickly ejects its life force back into the inert profusion of vegetal life, which will once again give rise to a sentient being as we follow the vines up the panel towards the next monster.

These phantasms are very far and very close to a boy on the other side of the world timidly watching the sun through a tangle of redwood needles. But each of these instances encodes an act of imagination that weaves in and out of commonplace perceptions. Amid the branches, the leaves, the flowers, the raindrops, something stirs, and then it



dissolves again into a steady whispering. Whether or not a person believes that the supersensible exists beyond human consciousness or only within its bounds, regardless of whether reality is understood as being primarily subjective or having an independent material basis, the chimeric stands as evidence pointing toward the notion that the perceptible and the imperceptible exist along a continuously refined spectrum, a spectrum that in at least one vocabulary, begins on one end in pure matter and on the other ends in pure spirit, that is, in God.

These phantasms and imaginings are not merely ornaments. They are integral parts of an elaborate mental process, small but important bones in the skeleton of thought. But bones cannot function without envelopes of muscle, ligament, nerves, and skin. And so it is with consciousness. These two situations—the boy watching the sun in California, the pilgrim tracing the carvings in Verona—differ in that one is governed by a state of wonder and curiosity, the other by fascination and mild horror. To continue the metaphor, the bone connects to more than one muscle. Perception intersects the imagination at certain discrete points, of which the chimera, I hope I have shown, is one. The many points at which emotions spill over into both perception and imagination constitute yet another vast plane of consciousness. But the emotions bisect imagination according to patterns whose complexity far exceeds the scope of this essay, which aspires only to make a fleeting description of a few fragments, glimpsed through screens of green and white.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This essay grew from a seed planted at a lecture given by Joseph Koerner. It was nourished by the expertise and companionship of Marcus Pilz during travels throughout Italy and Germany. It would never have been written at all if Matthew Bird had not taken me to Reims.