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# Thoreau, Rousseau and the Aesthetics of Romantic Taxonomy

Patrick H. Vincent

Henry David Thoreau's interest in botany comes at the end of an intense century of taxonomic activity bracketed by Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* in 1758 and Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. This interest suggests a desire to bypass Emersonian idealism in order to redirect aesthetics toward the empirical world. Thinking through the contradictions between essentialism and nominalism already contained in taxonomy gives Thoreau the critical insight he needs to circumvent the Romantic confusion of mind and world we see in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings on botany, while at the same time escaping from what Michel Foucault has described in *Les mots et les choses* as the lifelessness of Enlightenment science.

In 1850, three years after leaving his cabin at Walden Pond, Thoreau began to devote himself seriously to botany. He created an herbarium, and over the next two years read a large amount of natural history from Darwin all the way back to the so-called "father of taxonomy", Carl von Linné (Richardson 254, Angelo 2). Linnaeus, whose "quiet bravery" he had earlier celebrated Carlylean fashion in his 1842 review entitled "Natural History of Massachusetts," took on a central role in this middle period, which critics generally associate with a new, more scientific turn in his thinking (Harding 290; Sattelmayer 79). A journal entry written on 19 August 1851 eloquently summarises what drew Thoreau to botany and to Linnaeus in particular:

> How copious and precise the botanical language to describe the leaves, as well as the other parts of a plant! Botany is worth studying if only for the precision of its terms, – To learn the value of words and a system. It is wonderful how much pain has been taken to describe a flower's leaf, compared for instance with the care that is taken in describing a psychological fact. Suppose as much ingenuity (perhaps it would be needless) in making a

> language to express sentiments! [. . .] The precision and copiousness of botanical language applied to the description of moral qualities. (*Journal* II, VII, 409-410)

Thoreau's analogy between the objective language of botany and the subjective language of affect most obviously points back to the Emersonian theory of correspondences, in which Nature is imagined as a symbol of the spirit. But rather than arguing for the symbolic value of nature, the passage insists on the difficulty of establishing such a transcendental leap, dwelling instead on the particular, concrete forms of the phenomenal world. As H. Daniel Peck has argued, Thoreau distinguishes himself from Emerson by focusing on a horizontal frame of perception in which the relation between objects is more important than their vertical relation to the divine (53-55).

This change of reference is not an avoidance of the ontological and epistemological question of man's relation to the world, but rather an attempt at reshaping such a relation. If Thoreau's analogy between nature and the mind recalls Emerson, his desire to give more precision and method to the language of affect returns us to the Enlightenment origin of aesthetics. "Born from the discourse of the body" (13) as Terry Eagleton writes, aesthetics is an attempt to formalise (and hopefully reconcile) the subject to the world by systematising moral sentiments into categories such as the Beautiful and the Sublime. It thus has its origin in the same structure of feeling as natural history, which, as Michel Foucault has argued, seeks to "purify" its representations of the world by applying a classificatory grid onto the visible and by reducing all objects to a flat surface, "un pur tableau des choses" constituted through language (145-150). It seems strange to think that the poet Thoreau would be even remotely interested in Linnaeus' artificial system of taxonomy, famously characterised as lifeless in *Les mots et les choses* (173). Yet many so-called belles-lettristic writers, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were also fervent adepts of Linnaeus. Barbara Stafford explains that "the study of natural history [. . .] helped undermine the strict Baconian tradition that established the antithesis between science and poetry, thinking and feeling" (55). Thoreau's interest in botany comes at the end of an intense century of taxonomic activity bracketed by Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* in 1758 and Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859. As I wish to argue, this interest suggests a desire to bypass Emersonian idealism in order to redirect aesthetics toward the empirical world. As in his complex relation to Louis Agassiz and to science in general, Thoreau does

not simply embrace then reject the Linnaean system, although some critics have described it this way (Baym 9, Angelo 8). Rather, thinking through the contradictions between essentialism and nominalism, or the universal and the particular, already contained in taxonomy gives Thoreau the critical insight he needs to circumvent the Romantic confusion of mind and world, words and things that we see in Rousseau, while at the same time escaping from the so-called lifelessness of Enlightenment science.

Thoreau's justification of his belated attraction to Linnaean classification closely resembles Rousseau's own explanations a century earlier, a time when the Linnaean system was as seductive as it was controversial (Endersby 3). "If you would read books on botany," Thoreau writes in a journal entry on 17 February 1852,

> Go to the fathers of the science. Read Linnaeus at once. [. . .] His "Philosophica Botanica," which Rousseau, Sprengel, and others praised so highly, – I doubt if it has ever been translated into English. It is simpler, more easy to understand, and more comprehensive, than any of the hundred manuals to which it has given birth. A few pages of cuts representing the different parts of plants, with the botanical names attached, is worth whole volumes of explanation. (*Journal* III, V, 308-309)

The above passage suggests two significant points. First, although Thoreau had been using Linnaean binomials informally since 1842 (Angelo 1), it was not until the early 1850s that he began to envision Linnaean taxonomy as a total, or "comprehensive," as well as a highly efficient, system. Second, he was obviously aware that other amateur scientists, notably Rousseau, also praised this system, even if we have no evidence that he actually read any of the Genevan philosopher's works.[1] Thoreau, as an advocate of simplicity, is attracted to the Linnaean system as much for its beauty as for its scientific efficiency. In the above entry, he even humorously attributes to himself the Linnaean category of "Botanophilist," or persons "who have left behind some observations on plants, even if those objects have no direct relation with the science of botany:

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[1] Thoreau read French fluently, but, as Walter Harding writes, "there is no evidence that he ever read Rousseau directly," even arguing for different sensibilities (97-98). My own project hopes to re-examine Harding's claim that there are no major influences in Thoreau attributable to Continental literature. There are two extant studies on the affinities between Thoreau and Rousseau, by M. J. Temmer, "Rousseau and Thoreau," and L. Gary Lambert, "Rousseau and Thoreau." Stanley Cavell also compares their conception of freedom in *Senses* (87-89).

such as anatomists, gardeners and authors of miscellanies," the latter including "economists, biologists, theologians, poets" (Linné 19, 22; my translation).[2] On 12 March 1852, still plunged in his reading of Linnaeus, Thoreau calls him "this lawgiver of science, this systematizer, this methodist" then claims that he "describes with the greatest economy of words what some would have required a small volume to tell, all on a small page" (*Journal* III, VI, 347-348). This ability to fit all of nature onto one page recalls Foucault's description of Enlightenment taxonomy as the desire to reduce all objects to a flat surface, a desire that Thoreau shares here. Rousseau says this much in his fragmentary *Dictionnaire de botanique*, where he celebrates Linnaeus as a hero for having given to botany "une nouvelle langue qui épargnât ce long circuit de paroles qu'on voit dans les anciennes descriptions" (1206). Like Thoreau, he finds aesthetic value in the Linnaean system of plant classification, labeling its new linguistic formulations as "expressifs, courts, sonores et [formant] même des constructions élégantes par leur extrême précision" (ibid.).

Thoreau and Rousseau are not so much drawn to Linnaeus's actual terminology as to the ideal that underpins his classificatory system. In his *Lettres sur la botanique*, for example, Rousseau withholds teaching his pupil any terminology until she understands the principles of the Linnean system itself, based on the sexual reproduction of plants. "Pour moi, je ne connais point d'étude raisonnable qui ne soit qu'une science des mots" (1171). Thoreau, on the other hand, finds in the scientific study of nature a way to escape history and to discover in it essential truths: "Nature, at least, takes no pains to introduce him to the works of his predecessors, but only presents him with her own *Opera Omnia*" (*Journal* III, V, 271: 2 February 1852). While the prime motivation of all taxonomists is to discover the natural system that can best describe this *opera omnia*, the definition of what "natural" really means varied greatly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For Linnaeus, it meant the essential or true system, according to Ernst Mayr. His classification was based on the metaphysical ideal that "the genera and higher taxa, as God's creation, represented unchangeable essences" (200). In other words, while it reduces all objects to a flat surface, Linnean taxonomy also imagines a transcendent essence behind or beyond that surface.

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[2] The 1788 French edition of Linnaeus's *Philosophica Botanica* tellingly opens with an epigraph taken from Rousseau, suggesting that the two men were commonly associated by the end of the eighteenth century.

Linnaeus's celebrated adversary, Buffon, influenced by Leibniz and nominalism rather than by Platonism and Thomistic logic, understood "natural" very differently: for him, it simply meant practical (Mayr 180-181). As Mayr describes it, Buffon's system focuses on continuity rather than on division, seeking above all to "paint vivid pictures of different kinds of animals" (ibid). Linnaeus's system reduces nature to its most generic elements, while Buffon's method, to take up a distinction Foucault established, can only acknowledge individual species in a holistic way. While the two natural scientists' ideas progressively merged by the end of the eighteenth century (Mayr 182), Foucault's claim that "Buffon et Linné posent la même grille," that they relied on the same closed epistemological framework (150), misses the point that Linnean taxonomy imagines a transcendent essence beyond nature's surface, whereas Buffon's method, adopted by the French school of natural history, dwells on surfaces in order to value nature in its entirety.

This tension between essentialism and nominalism is dramatised in Rousseau's own natural history writings, which introduce an aesthetics of the sublime in order to resist what Foucault has called Enlightenment taxonomy's lifeless representation of nature.[3] His *Lettres sur la botanique*, as we saw above, extol the necessity of a universal system built on an essentialist ideal of nature, a viewpoint best illustrated by his intriguing experiments in pasigraphy, or a non-linguistic system of signs to classify plants.[4] Like Buffon, on the other hand, he values the particularity and continuity of plants in the *Dictionnaire de botanique*, using poetic language to describe the phenomenal world, what he calls "la robe de notre mère commune" and "les près émaillés de fleurs." (1249). As Bernhard Kuhn notes, "botany [in Rousseau] is described as a gentle skimming of the surface, a casual contemplation and nomenclature of the visible world" (5). Rousseau uses the same style to describe plants in this scientific

[3] Basing himself primarily on Rousseau's botanical dictionary entry for the flower, Bernhard Kuhn suggests that Rousseau refuses the static tableau of taxonomy by representing nature in a dynamic, proto-vitalist manner. He thus writes that "Rousseau locates the essence of the flower in its becoming" (7). While the dictionary entry allows for such a reading, I would argue that Rousseau's overwhelming emphasis, here and elsewhere, on flowers' aesthetic surface qualities locates the flower's essence not in itself, but in its subjective, transcendent relation to the viewer.

[4] In the *Lettres*, Rousseau criticizes botanists' pedantic naming of plants in Greek and Latin, "comme si pour connaître la plante il fallait commencer par être un savant grammairien" (1191). On his experiments in pasigraphy, see note p. 1830. Several pages of the pasigraphy project are on display in the Salle Rousseau at the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire de Neuchâtel.

treatise as in the more literary *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, where he also writes of "brillantes fleurs, email des près, ombrages frais" (122).[5] In fact, nominalism regularly collapses into essentialism in *Les rêveries*, a text that juxtaposes an obsessive attention to the surface of things, or what we today call thick description ("je ne voulais pas laisser un poil d'herbe, pas un atome vegetal qui ne fût amplement décrit" 88), with the eroticized pleasure of identifying an essence beneath this surface: "Rien n'est plus singulier que les ravissements, les extases que j'éprouvais à chaque observation que je faisais sur la structure et l'organisation végétal" (88).

Botany is not just a minor form of consolation or escape (87), or even of madness (114), as the Genevan philosopher would have had us believe: it is also a way to apprehend the world, and more importantly himself, aesthetically, using the concrete particularity of plants for the apperception of his own universal subjecthood. The strong sense of pleasure he describes, metaphorically amplified by the sexual nature of the Linnean classification system, reminds us that Rousseau's botanizing mainly serves an aesthetic function. In all his natural history writings he tells us that disinterestedness in viewing plants is necessary: a medicinal or any other instrumental use kills plants' aesthetic value. The essence he perceives is not that of the natural system itself, however, but rather of his own unchangeable subjectivity. Ten years before the publication of Kant's third *Critique*, Rousseau resolves the dialectic between particular and universal, world and subject through the reverie, a sublime synthesis that gives him a transcendent feeling of autonomy. A good example of this comes in his description, toward the end of the seventh letter, of a botanizing expedition to the Robailla. The process of identifying plants induces a narcissistic dream in which the author suddenly feels alone in a world emptied of all particularised presence (125).

Rousseau's epiphany is grounded in the organicist confusion of language and nature that has come to be known as Romantic ideology. In his "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," Paul de Man cites the *Fifth Rêverie* as a paradigmatic example of the poetic imagination's struggle first to appropriate, then to transcend the ontological primacy

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[5] Takuya Kobayashi, who is currently writing a doctoral thesis on Rousseau and botany at the University of Neuchâtel, has traced the sources used in the *Dictionnaire*, demonstrating the scientific seriousness of Rousseau's project, indebted to all the major botanical treatises of the period, and indicating that it was written around 1777, at the same time as *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*.

of the object world (16). To crassly paraphrase de Man's argument, the poetic word seeks to be like a flower, only to substitute itself with that flower, giving priority to itself as the sign of pure consciousness. Although organised according to the Linnean system, the pressed plants that Rousseau collects, like poetic language, remind him less of the phenomenal world than of his own subjective existence, of the places and events of his past, such as his day at the Robailla. "C'est la chaîne des idées accessoires qui m'attachent à la botanique," he writes (128). Thus even fragments of plants, which Linnaeus proscribes from herbariums, are enough to activate his memory (see Matthey 40, Linné 8-9).

This Romantic desire to make language organic and thus entirely literal is also present in Thoreau. As Stanley Cavell has argued, Thoreau shares the Romantics' quest, which resembles Kant's anti-skepticist project, of recovering the objects at the origin of language, therefore becoming a second originator or creator (64). Comparing writing to plants, for example, Thoreau notes that "those sentences are good and well discharged which are like so many resiliencies from the spring floor of our life, – a distinct fruit and kernel itself, springing from terra firma" (*Journal* III, II, 107: 12 November 1851). A year later, writing about Linnaeus's artificial system, he wonders, "Are there no works written in the language of flowers?" (*Journal*, III, V, 281: 5 February 1852). Elsewhere, he even regrets the sort of narcissistic reverie he once was able to feel: "Ah, those youthful days! Are they never to return? When the walker does not too curiously observe particulars, but sees, hears, scents, tastes, and feels only himself . . . the unbounded universe was his" (*Journal*, V, I, 75: 30 March 1853).

Thoreau's reaction in January 1852 to the aridity of a botany book based on the Linnean system again recalls Rousseau's poetic approach to nature, yet the pun on pressing flowers at the end of the passage indicates the different strategy Thoreau will adopt in escaping the "lifeless" language of taxonomy:

> But after all, where is the flower lore? For the first book, and not the last, should contain the poetry of flowers. The natural system may tell us the value of a plant in medicine or the arts or for food, but neither it nor the Linnean, to any great extent, tells us its chief value and significance to man, which in any measure accounts for its beauty, its flower-like properties. [. . .] The most poetical of books. It should have the beauty and the fragrance of flowers, some of their color. A keepsake! What a keepsake a manual of botany! In which is uttered, breathed, man's love of flowers. It is dry as a *hortus*

> *siccus*. Flowers are pressed into the botanist's service. (*Journal* III, IV, 251-253: 30 January 1852)

Reasserting his status as amateur "botanophilist," Thoreau expresses the wish to write botany manuals that are also keepsakes, or books that recall cherished moments of the past. The past he hopes to invoke is centred not just on himself, however, but on his relation to nature, "man's love of flowers." Thoreau's refusal to *press* flowers into the botanist's service is a rejection both of the kind of taxonomy which reduces all objects to a flat surface, and of Romantic aesthetics, in which pressed plants serve only to enhance the writer's subjectivity.

Caught between his mistrust of scientific reductionism, and his discomfort with the anthropocentrism inherent in an idealist, transcendent representation of nature, Thoreau seeks a different synthesis than Rousseau to the dialectic between essentialism and nominalism. His novel method of collecting plant specimens perfectly emblematises the idiosyncrasy of his solution:

> I am beginning to think that my hat, whose lining is gathered in midway so as to make a shelf, is about as good a botany-box as I could have and far more convenient, and there is something in the darkness and the vapors that rise from the head – at least if you take a bath – which preserves flowers through a long walk. (*Journal*, IV, II, 133: 23 June 1852)

Thoreau here literally refuses to press flowers into the botanist's service. Plants are not pressed but rather preserved thanks to the darkness and body fumes, a method that clashes sharply with Linnaeus's prescription that plants must be culled without humidity and immediately dried between two sheets of paper (Linné 8-9). The hat's darkness and vapours, so close to the wearer's body, represent a sort of attenuated sublime in which the particularity of the object is never fully sublimated by the perceiving subject nor flattened in the name of objective science, allowing for a fragile equilibrium or co-existence between the demands of a transcendental universalism and a concrete particularism. Thoreau's comment in *Walden*, "we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us," serves as an apt set of instructions for this make-shift botany box (399).

While Thoreau does go on to press and dry the collected plants back home, eventually creating an herbarium of over 900 specimens, the hat

momentarily protects the objects culled, at the same time symbolically protecting the botanist from the aridity (and scepticism) of classification. Some would argue that this makes for bad science. As Ray Angelo notes, "his habit of using his straw hat as a botany box to bring home plants collected in the field tended to encourage the gathering of small, inadequate, or incomplete samples" (7). But his peculiar habit also can be interpreted as additional evidence of Thoreau's growing evolutionary understanding of nature, consecrated a few years later by Darwin.[6] Moreover, it helps to explain why, in *Walden* (1854), *The Maine Woods* (posthumously published in 1864) and especially in his later journals, Thoreau devotes so much space to taxonomy after having seemingly rejected it as lifeless. As many critics have pointed out, his attacks on modern science in his journals become more frequent toward the middle of the 1850s. He writes, for instance, that the man of science "studies nature as a dead language" (V, III, 135: 10 May 1853); or, a year later, that "the inhumanity of science concerns me . . . I feel that this is not the means of acquiring true knowledge" (VI, VI, 311: 28 May 1854); or else, in an oft quoted passage comparing professors to a rain-gauge, that "your observation, to be interesting, i.e. to be significant, must be subjective" (VI, VII, 237-238; 5 May 1854). Thoreau continues obsessively to describe the world around him, so much so that one biographer labels him a "classificationist" (cited in Hildebidle 20), because he is able to imagine language, like his (un)pressed plants, as the expression at one and the same time of objective facts and of transcendental truths. This doubling of language, at once scientific and artistic, distant and familiar, enables what Cavell has called Thoreau's relation of "nextness" with the world, in which man is both an impartial observer and an "indweller" (107-108). As Thoreau himself writes in 1856, botany is a way of getting to "know my neighbours, if possible, – to get a little nearer to them" (*Journal*, IX, V, 157-158: 4 December 1856).

Foucault concludes his famous chapter on classification in *Les mots et les choses* with the suggestive remark that natural history, like Kantian philosophy, develops the same critical relation between language and nature. "Connaître la nature, c'est en effet bâtir à partir du langage vrai mais qui découvrira à quelles conditions tout langage est possible et dans quelles limites il peut avoir un domaine de validité" (175). This construction of a new language critical of its own limits is precisely what

[6] For more on Thoreau and development theory, see my essay "The Professor and the Fox" (2007).

Thoreau set out to do in his journal. Laura Dassow Walls has labelled the journal project Thoreau's "technology of inscription," a way to braid together self and nature through a language that combines the anthropocentrism of idealism with the objectivity of science (125).[7] As I hope to have shown, Thoreau's intense reflection during the 1850s on Linnaeus and Enlightenment taxonomy helped him to imagine this new language by thinking through the dialectic between essentialism and nominalism, itself a reflection of the competing demands of science and art. But in a journal entry written two years before his death, Thoreau hints that this dreamed of synthesis, what we may call his own ideal natural system, can never be achieved. Like Marx's historical materialism, it directs us toward an ideal future. "All science," Thoreau writes, "is only a makeshift, a means to an end which is never attained. [. . .] In science, I should say, all description is postponed till we know the whole, but then science itself will be cast aside" (XIV, III, 117-120: 13 October 1860).

[7] See Sharon Cameron, *Writing Nature*, in which the author argues that Thoreau wants to find a way to make "the wholeness of nature and the wholeness of the Journal" identical (6). Laura Dassow Walls develops this idea, calling it "empirical holism" in *Seeing New Worlds* (4).

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