

Florilegium

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What sort of thing is language? It seems self-evident to many that language cannot be regarded as wholly, as exactly, a natural thing, since language, of the developed human variety, is what marks human beings off from nature. We can no longer be wholly natural once we have language, which is to say, since language is always there before us, right from the beginning.

And yet the vast majority of languages are known as ‘natural languages’, languages that have arisen on their own, without conscious intent and largely without, or in the teeth of, supervision. So the very thing that plucks or nudges us out of nature, making it possible to stand aside from and reflect on our own natures, is itself a natural thing. It is in our natures, indigenous exotics, to take leave of our natures, we are the very native soil of the unnatural.

But do not all beings in nature begin similarly by taking their leave from nature, in some bifurcation, divergence, deflection from the given? Perhaps nature, *natura naturans*, nature following its own path, is no other than this turning aside from the path. *Natura denaturans*, then: nature unnaturing itself, finds and forms its own nature in branching, breaking off, remission, ramification, variation, sport.

There is no more insisting instance of this internal difference of nature and language than the naming of flowers and plants. The names of plants seem not quite to cling or lock on to what they name. Ferdinand de Saussure saw signifier and signified as related like the recto and verso of a sheet of paper. But plants and their names seem rather to intertwine, to convolve, to co-evolve, as the ivy and the trunk, the rose and the briar. Edward Thomas is prompted to such perplexity by the names of the bush *Artemisia abrotanum*, also known as Southern Wormwood and Southernwood:

Old Man, or Lad’s-love, – in the name there’s nothing
To one that knows not Lad’s-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names. (Thomas 1979, 84)

Looking at a garden or wood without being able to name the plants involves you in a kind of green blindness or blur. Seeing and saying seem entirely distinct from each other, and yet the seeing is seeded by the saying. A rose by any other name would

doubtless smell as sweet, but would it still be the smell of a rose? Flower-words, word-flowers, are indeed, a kind of *pensée sauvage*, the little whimsy which Claude Lévi-Strauss so relished – the sylvan thinking that springs up like a wild pansy, the plant also known as ‘heartsease’ and ‘love-in-idleness’ and for which Shakespeare seems to have invented the belief that its juice induced hopeless love of the first object on which one’s gaze lights.

The intertwining of individual plants and their names is reduplicated in the higher-level intertwining of philology and botany. The relationships and developments of language itself are described in the language of roots, stems, family trees, offshoots and branches. Collections of writings of different kinds are known as anthologies, literally bouquets of flowers.

Of course, all these conjugating roots and branches, these folios, filiations and foliages, are metaphors, rather than simple, literal or self-evident facts of language. They are things you can say about language, but cannot directly see, or not until you have said them, after which it may be difficult to see anything else. But how is this work of metaphor itself to be understood, what sort of face does language put on its own figural operations? As flowering itself, *mirabile dictu*. The work of metaphor, which is what prompts and permits us to figure language as a mode of growth and flowering, is itself regularly figured as efflorescence, arborescence. For centuries, it has been traditional to refer to the branchings of language away from the bare and literal fact of naming as the *flowers of rhetoric*.

The orders of flora and fauna, the vegetable and the carnal, are mirror worlds, that seem to converge only in exotic species like the Venus fly-trap. The order of the carnivore is the toothed order of murder, violence and sin; the vegetable order is meek, weak, infant. And yet the orders of fauna and flora also have their thriving copulations. A garden is a carnival entanglement of flesh and petal. There is a testicular lewdness even in the most esoteric and aristocratic orchid, vulvas everywhere convolve. Horticulture breeds hysterias, ravishments and depravities abound in every bed, red in leaf and thorn. The monthly defluxions of maidens used to be known as their flowers; passion-flowers picturebook the technology of the torn flesh, gashed and stabbed, obscene stigmata, *ostensio vulnerum*. This lubricious interleaving of skin and leaf, of blood and blossom, is nowhere more subtle and insidious than in the aromas of flowers, which orchestrate the faecal stench, though often diminished to a musky basso-profondo underhum, with the civil, silvered sopranos of the tiptoe topnotes. Heide Hatry’s flowers bring to visibility and nameability this mixed body of death and delicacy, lust and loveliness commingling.

Plants, whose nature is to propagate, to spread blindly outwards, are turned back on themselves in the enclosures of garden and greenhouse. This turning back of spilling wilderness in gardens is a double confinement, the literal garden being an image of the garden of names, the literary garden, into which nature is thereby taken up. Gardens are rhyming dictionaries. There was no Eden before this naming, the plants sprouted it, *natura naturata nominata*. As Christopher Smart knew well enough, naming is a kind of cultivation, and gardening a nomenclature:

For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's Creation.
For the warp and woof of flowers are worked by perpetual moving spirits.
For flowers are good both for the living and the dead.
For there is a language of flowers.
For there is a sound reasoning upon all flowers.
For elegant phrases are nothing but flowers.
For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ.
For flowers are medicinal.
For flowers are musical in ocular harmony.
For the right names of flowers are yet in heaven. God make gard'ners better
nomenclators. (Smart 1990, 96)

But, let it once again be said, there is no simple hinge dissevering the order of nameless things from that of thingless names. For what is a plant but a kind of mute self-figuring, a groping for face, and what is a flower but a spurt of annunciation blurted out of anonymity? Flowers are anatomical anagrams, lickerishly eviscerate, loose-lipped, all ears, eyes, teeth, toes and fingers, their trumpets the blaring throats they broadcast with, and through which 'each hung bell's/Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name' (Hopkins 1970, 90). The names of flowers bud, bloom and variegate, like flowers themselves, bifurcating between their Sunday-best botanical designations and their vulgate, common-or-garden nicknames, proliferating aliases and sobriquets. Every garden is a library, every library a florilegium. It is the lexicon or morphological mapping of itself, the shaping of names amid the naming of shapes. In her corporeal punnings, her plays on ears, bellies, fingers and tongues, Heide Hatry hothouses this flowering of flesh into word and word into flesh.

References

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