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Article

Knowing Apples

Lorraine Shannon

Independent Scholar, 50 Breillat St, Annandale NSW 2038, Australia;
E-Mail: shannontext@ozemail.com.au; Tel.: +61-2-9818-8176

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Abstract: This essay employs a first-person fictional narrator to explore the nature of human-plant relations through the example of Thoreau's *Wild Apples* and enacts the transformational process necessary to write in conjunction with non-conscious vegetal life by paying attention to the unthought known of the vegetative soul.

Keywords: Apple tree; vegetable soul; writing style

> The essay—that enigmatic and elusive genre which seems to defy definition—is best understood or grasped in terms of literature as event and enlightenment as process [1].

> The vine is dried up, and the fig tree languishes; the pomegranate tree, the palm tree also, and the apple tree, even all the trees of the field, are withered; because joy is withered away from the sons of men [2].

Either that apple tree goes or I go, my father announced. The tree in question, a Golden Delicious, was he declared, a typically unpalatable cultivar—unbearably sweet, tasteless, easily bruised and quick to shrivel. What's more it attracted swarms of wasps into the garden all summer. It stood for all that was wrong with the world—humans tampering with nature when they should leave well alone, he said. Thinking we can make plants do what we want without any repercussions.

My mother sniffed at what she regarded as my father's out-fashioned conservatism. She believed in the benefits of progress and was adamant that the sweetness of the Golden Delicious was preferable to my father's bitter, heritage varieties. What's more, she had grown this tree from a pip and was deeply attached to it. Its blossom, she said, brought her much pleasure. Her apple tree was staying and that was that. Of course, as my father remarked, she was romanticising, imagining herself as some modern version of Johnny Appleseed. Everyone knew that apples didn't grow true from seed, that "an apple tree grown from a seed will be a wildling bearing little resemblance to its parent" [3].

In retrospect, I'm sure there were other factors involved, but to my child's mind the apple tree was solely to blame for my parent's divorce. And so, you might say, I gained an apple tree in place of a human father—an apple tree that it was impossible to ignore and about which I harboured many conflicting feelings.

Thoreau, of course, was well aware of the connections between apple trees and people. "It is remarkable," he said, "how closely the history of the apple tree is connected with that of man" ([4], p. 1). In his view human destiny could not be separated from natural history and once we lost sight of our "wild origin" we were doomed. I, however, was more impressed by the apple's ability to cause division and discontent. The further away I could get from my Golden Delicious father-replacement the better. It was the Apple of Discord that rang true to me. I read of the causes of the Trojan War, of how Eris, Greek goddess of chaos, piqued at not being invited to the wedding feast of Peleus and Thetis, tossed into the party a golden apple inscribed with the word "kallisti" meaning "to the prettiest one." Hera, Athena and Aphrodite fought for the apple until Paris was elected to choose which one was the prettiest. Of course they each attempted to sway him in their favour and Aphrodite, having promised him the most beautiful woman in the world, was presented with the golden apple. The upshot of all this was that Paris wooed Helen, wife of Menelaus, and escaped with her to Troy. And the rest, as they say, is history. So on one point, I did agree with Thoreau—we certainly couldn't afford to ignore the role of the apple in human life.

Although Thoreau acknowledges this myth he prefers to focus on what he regards as the positive connotations of the apple. He quotes Pliny who says "Of trees there are some which are altogether wild, some more civilized" and the apple is unquestionably in the latter category. It is, he claims, "as harmless as a dove, as beautiful as a rose, and as valuable as flocks and herds. It has been longer cultivated than any other, and so is more humanized" ([4], p. 2).

Surprisingly, given his emphasis on the apple tree as civilised, Thoreau was not much interested in artificially bred apple varieties. It was, instead, the wild apples derived from cultivated stocks that, he declared, were the plants "whose story we have to tell."

Why these particular apples? These obscure escapees from cultivation surviving on the margins? And why would we want to tell a story of something so apparently unknowable, so different from ourselves? There was after all no shortage of interesting stories to tell about people. What mattered to me was the effect of a specific plant on my life, not plants themselves. Of course we can tell stories of taxonomy and classification or stories of plants as a source of food, fuel or building material but these were not the sort of stories Thoreau was talking about. He wanted stories about how life appears to a plant, how it relates to the world and seeks to express itself; stories in which one thing develops organically out of another, recreating the plant in imagination in the same way as vegetation reproduces itself, vegetation that, having escaped from cultivation, "darts upward for joy…and bears its own peculiar fruit in triumph" ([4], p. 12). His *Wild Apples* is a story in which types of apple symbolise types of people and thoughts hidden in "lurking places"—like windfall apples under leaves—are uncovered in their singularity and uniqueness.

Yet he does not entirely dismiss cultivated apples. He remarks that "all natural products [have] a certain volatile and ethereal quality which represents their highest value and which cannot be vulgarised or bought and sold" ([4], p. 8). The true value of even the most marketable apple, he assures us, cannot be measured in directly utilitarian terms. Rather than creating a hierarchy of apples, Thoreau

simply acknowledged difference. He did, however, believe that wild apples derived from cultivated stock stood for our ability to adapt to the natural environment. By refusing to exploit the landscape and allowing it to naturalise us, our "uncommon senses" could also be cultivated, enabling us to perceive the paradise around us.

To write under the auspices of these uncommon senses would be to expose ourselves to the logic of plant life, learn from it, and become immersed in this logic even as we acknowledged that we can never become identical to it. I, however, baulked at such a notion. The effect of one Golden Delicious apple tree had proved quite enough to deal with and I had no desire to invite any additional vegetation into—dare I say it—my family tree?

And I had a long history of western philosophising about plants to back me up. These well-established theories, I reasoned, were unlikely to be mistaken about the place or abilities of plants. Plato started it all by establishing a tripartite classification of souls. Aristotle quickly followed with a very clear hierarchy in which the soul was present differently in plants, animals and humans. He associated the animation of plants with the most basic processes of nutrition and reproduction. As Matthew Hall writes,

> Aristotle constructed a hierarchy of life with plants placed firmly at the bottom…plants were…regarded to lack the faculties of sensation and of intellect. Such hierarchical ordering demonstrates a drive toward separation; one that is based upon removing continuities from plant and human life [5].

Much as I wished to believe Aristotle had achieved my desired aim of establishing an unbridgeable gap between plants and people, I wasn't entirely convinced. For starters, he broke his own rules of classification when he characterised both plants and animals as living things in need of nourishment. When considering the relationship between the three types of soul he stated, "the earlier type always exists potentially in that which follows" [6]. The implication is, as Michael Marder notes, that the vegetative soul has a "potential" existence in the sensitive soul of the animal and the rational soul of the human. If this was the case then I was potentially both an animal and a vegetal being, although exactly how was not only a mystery to me, but a most unpalatable notion.

Michael Marder believes that

> vegetal life…signifies whatever remains after the subtraction of the potentialities unique to other genera of the soul. … After we strip life of all its recognizable features, vegetal beings go on living; plant-soul is the remains of the psyche reduced to its non-human and non-animal modality. It is life in its an-archic bareness, inferred from the fact that it persists in the absence of the signature features of animal vivacity, and it is a source of meaning, which is similarly bare, non-anthropocentric, and yet ontologically vibrant. In a word, life as survival [7].

Perhaps, I thought, the despised Golden Delicious in the orchard was a symptom of this basic, vegetable quality, unknown and unrecognised within my psyche, that had proved so disruptive in my life, pulling me this way and that, immersing me in a "mutual atmosphere" that gave rise to thoughts of strange, dark hybridisations. After all the word "vegetable" has two meanings. It is derived from *vegetare*, "to animate or enliven" and *vegere* "to be alive" yet it also refers to the passivity of a vegetative state. Aristotle captured this double meaning when he stated that plant-soul is the perishable part of the psyche that does not survive the death of the body ([7], p. 20). The life of a plant, in other

words, is balanced on the fulcrum between the living and the dead—or perhaps more accurately, from my perspective, situated in a zone between destructiveness and creativity.

So my mother's assurances that my father had been mistaken—that the Golden Delicious was not a cultivated hybrid at all but was bred from a chance seedling found on a family farm in West Virginia were simply irrelevant. It was the capacity of plants to proliferate, to take over in wild, untameable abundance while feigning passivity that I couldn't abide. It was all very well for Max Nordau to proclaim that a healthy poet was a "chlorophyllic plant", for Coleridge to figure his poems as vegetal productions or Emerson to write that "thought is the blossom, language the bud, action the fruit behind" [8] but, as Robert Mitchell argues, we can't ignore

> the speargrass and bindweed that silently and indifferently erase all traces of Margaret in Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*; the basil plant of John Keats's *Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil*, which derives its sustenance from the decapitated head of Lorenzo, buried in the pot; and the thistles, fungi, and hemlock of Shelley's "The Sensitive Plant" that, as "forms of living death," displace and kill both the mimosa and the small mammals of the poem [9].

Clearly the vegetal trace lurking within the human psyche wasn't necessarily entirely friendly and precisely how it affected my subjectivity and writing ability was a matter of increasing concern to me. While Coleridge maintained that literary invention involved the natural, unplanned, and unconscious process by which things grow, he was also as M. H. Abrams points out, "cautious to avoid the anarchical tendency against external rules by exploiting simultaneously another possibility in the growing plant—the aspect of biological laws" [10].

This didn't help me much. It still indicated that somewhere below the surface of my consciousness my fugitive vegetative soul might be sprouting some insidious weed against my will. There was, I realised, a basic contradiction in Abrams' defence of Coleridge when he stated that "though writing with seeming freedom, inspiration, and happy spontaneity…the work of imagination must start spontaneously into independent life and by its own energy evolve its final form in the same way that a tree grows" ([10], p. 225). He continues:

> Acting thus under "laws of its own origination," achieving works each of which is unique, the genius gives the laws by which his own products are to be judged; yet these laws are universal laws which he must necessarily obey, because his composition proceeds in accordance with the order of the living universe ([10], p. 225).

What was I to do given such a paradox? Simply write as I wished and claim to have made up the rules of writing while all the time my efforts were being dictated by the vegetal underbelly of my mind? Surely not. That had to be another solution.

In retrospect it was, I think, Goethe's understanding of style that saved the day. His essay "Simple Imitation of Nature, Manner, Style", provided the germ of an idea for my change of heart and acceptance of the apple tree that "In the essential prose/ of things…stands up, emphatic/ among the accidents/ of the afternoon, solvent/ not to be denied" [11].

Goethe wrote:

> It is obvious that…an artist can only become greater and more significant if he adds to his talents the expertise of a botanist; if he knows the influence of the different plants, from the roots upwards, and their continuing and mutual effect; if he observes and reflects on the successive development of the leaves,

> flowers, sex organs, fruit and the new seed. Then he will not simply demonstrate his taste by his choice of subject, but he will astonish and enlighten us by his accurate representation of these characteristics: and in this sense it could be said that he has formed a style [12].

It was Goethe's specific understanding of style that caught my attention. He defined it as intrinsic to morphology or the development of form. One of Goethe's fundamental claims about morphology was that its intention is to portray rather than explain [13]. Morphology developed as a kind of meta-category in which representation was privileged over explanations of development. Goethe recognised that beings and styles are epistemologically different, but morphology provided a means by which he could focus on their representational similarities. I began to think that such a style of writing might find a parallel in a style of living; that the generative capacity of plants might in fact bear some relation to the productive process of human creativity. This, however, did not mean that the formation and transformation of organic bodies could be attributed to the actions of some élan vital but involved the reciprocity of intrinsic forces and extrinsic conditions. My vegetative soul, in other words, was not a hidden administrator of biological laws. My Golden Delicious father-substitute whom I had distanced from my life deserved a more intimate and respectful relationship. It might even qualify as one of Thoreau's wild apples derived from cultivated stock. At the very least it was a cultivated variety with ethereal qualities that I had refused to recognise and instead worked all my life to vulgarise.

And I discovered other myths about apples that provided a counter-balance to the Apple of Discord. A.R. Littlewood, for example, relates a story of man who as a baby was given to a childless couple by the "Lady of the Sea." When he eventually failed to escape his fate of returning to the sea, his wife proved equal to the situation for she tossed three golden apples to the Lady of the Sea in return for a glimpse of her husband whom she then cleverly snatched to safety from the waves [14]. An apple, it seemed, could have a hand in love as easily as divorce. It contained within itself two seemingly contradictory but really complementary forces, one tending toward form, the other toward chaos.

What was clear was that neither I nor the apple tree could flourish in a mutual atmosphere of distrust and animosity. Some sort of change was called for. Subject and object, person and thing were entwined and this meant reappraising ways of representing the silent beings of vegetation. Previously I had understood development of form as development towards an explicit goal but this narrow understanding of style conceptualised solely as personal preference and individual taste lacked ethical content. It lacked sensitivity towards the non-verbal communication of plants and their right to flourish in their own way. To accept the right of the vegetable kingdom to thrive is also to bring joy to the vegetal being within us. Neither apple trees nor people are left to languish. Both my father and the Golden Delicious apple tree are long gone but they have formed aspects of my style of living. Although I regard myself as a wildling, I understand my insights as grafts, instances of my human desire to seek intimacy with plants, to strive for a more "pomocentric" life in which my being is grounded in a medium that is shared by all that lives. Together father and tree have allowed me to return home to myself.

Goethe argues that morphology establishes a new vantage point from which form may be considered: the vantage point of change, transformation, and development. For plants, one aspect of transformation is division—something I had misconstrued as divisiveness. Division I now realised could be a positive attribute. It signified becoming other to oneself, refusing to be self-contained. It

meant becoming aware of the fugitive vitality of plants that differs fundamentally from a life which only acknowledges an animal template. It meant accepting my wild origin and setting out to write with an understanding that this was an intrinsic force, an inventiveness propelled by non-conscious intentionality. Michael Marder describes this as a kind of thinking before thinking that operates independently from both instinctual adaptation and formal intelligence.

My experience has led me to believe there is a conscious level to writing the vegetal. It comes into being when a situation in life allows for the fascination with other forms of life to enchant rather than threaten, when the sweetness of the other offsets the inevitability of decay. It promises a rapture that is fused with patient commitment to the unknowability and specific materiality of otherness.

There is also an unconscious level that requires attending to the wordless element inside myself. It consists of working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is that I think. It is engaging with what Christopher Bollas calls the "unthought known" or "thinking an idea struggling to have me think it" [15]. It consists of a symbiotic relating in which the vegetative soul functions as a signifier of transformation. This is not a quest for possession but an identification with a medium that alters the conscious self. However, transformation does not mean gratification. Transformation may frustrate in the sense of initiating the need to readjust one's style of living and writing. Likewise, moments of transformation may not always be beautiful or wonderful—some may be frightening but nevertheless profoundly moving.

The transition from deep, enigmatic privacy to the culture of literature involves finding the word to speak the self; wording transforms the mutual atmosphere and enables words to be put in particular sequences that start the process of literary metamorphosis. Choosing specific words from among the welter of possible terms becomes part of thinking along with phenomena. For Thoreau it meant writing in which "the earth is not a mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum, like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquarians chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit, not a fossil earth but a living earth" [16].

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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