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Bernhard Kuhn

## Natural History and the History of the Self: Botany, Geology, and Autobiography in the Works of Goethe and Rousseau

*La botanique pour laquelle il me semble que j'étais né...*

– Rousseau

*Je dois certainement la vie aux plantes; ce n'est pas ce que je leur dois de bon.*

– Rousseau

*Jetzt leb' ich mit Leib und Seel in Stein und Bergen.*

– Goethe

In Rousseau's *Les Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* botanizing threatens at one point to displace writing as the solitary's main activity: "Le recueil de mes longs rêves est à peine commencé et déjà je sens qu'il touche à sa fin. Un autre amusement lui succède, m'absorbe, et m'ôte même le temps de rêver"<sup>1</sup>. The study of plants is granted an equally prominent position in Goethe's autobiographical account of his journey to Italy in the *Italienische Reise*: the quest for the elusive "Urpflanze" is one of the narrative's recurring and pressing motifs. While the botanical references are the most memorable, the *Italienische Reise* is filled with meteorological, optical, and, most frequently, mineralogical and geological observations. What is the relation between the study of nature and the study of the self? The subject in both autobiographies is a figure in self-imposed exile – Rousseau retreats from society to evade the perceived conspiracy against him and Goethe furtively escapes to Italy from what he would later characterize as certain intellectual if not physical death in Weimar. The natural sciences seem to provide both authors with an objective, stable reality upon which to anchor themselves in a time of personal

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, I, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond, Paris, Gallimard, 1959, p. 1061. This edition henceforth abbreviated in the text as OC followed by the volume and page numbers. I have preserved the spelling from this edition throughout.

crisis. Instead of reading their turn to science as a retreat from subjectivity, I would like to consider their minute and exacting study of nature as an attempt to break out of the available discursive models of French neo-classicism and German sentimentalism in order to formulate a new poetics, specifically a new language of self, based on a scientifically-acquired language of nature. Looking first at Rousseau's effort to develop a botanical system of signs which could perfectly transcribe the natural object, I reexamine from the perspective of his scientific work critical passages in *Les Confessions* and *Les Rêveries*. Turning to Goethe, I consider his natural historical mode of perception and his scientific preoccupations in the *Italienische Reise* as they relate to his formulation of self-identity and *Selbstbildung*.

The opening lines of Rousseau's definition of the flower in his *Dictionnaire de botanique* nicely dramatize the difficulty Rousseau has in separating the rhetorical flower, with all of its pleasing metaphorical associations, from the natural flower he wants to describe:

Si je livrois mon imagination aux douces sensations que ce mot [fleur] semble appeller, je pourrois faire un article agréable peut-être aux Bergers, mais fort mauvais pour les Botanistes. Ecartons donc un moment les vives couleurs, les odeurs suaves, les formes élégantes, pour chercher premièrement à bien connoître l'être organisé qui les rassemble (OC, IV, 1220-1).

Within the symbolic economy of Rousseau's writing, the shepherd, opposed here to the botanist, is not only a figure for the poet and for a literary, specifically pastoral, approach to nature, but also a representative of a lost, idyllic world – what Rousseau refers to as the “golden age” – in which man had a direct, unmediated contact with nature and with his fellow men. The seductive, siren-like appeal of the “douce sensations” momentarily tempts the author; yet, the shepherd's language remains, not just here but throughout Rousseau's work, a hopelessly nostalgic, inadequate form of substitution for an irretrievably lost presence. The underlying aim of Rousseau's various botanical works, then, is to discover some transparent, natural form of writing to replace the failed model of the “Berger”. The botanist, whose activity Rousseau characterizes as a gentle, meticulous, disinterested cataloguing and contemplation of the visible, embodies the ideal relation to nature: “Le botaniste ne

soufre point d'intermediaire entre la nature et lui" (OC, IV, 1250). Moreover, the language of the botanist, linked as it is to the scientific ideals of objectivity and precision, offers the possibility of textually conveying this unmediated relation to nature by creating a system of signs which allows for no ambiguity between thing and word, and hence no room for misunderstandings and misinterpretation.

Rousseau's search for "la langue de la chose" is, of course, fraught with contradictions and complications (OC, IV, 1151). Botanical language is, like all scientific discourse, a highly codified form of knowledge, arbitrary and conventional. It is at the furthest remove from Rousseau's hypothesized natural form of communication characterized by spontaneity and transparency. Rousseau constantly warns against the tendency for botanical language to divorce itself from the actual plant and become self-referential, to be nothing other than a language of books; instead of studying the plants of the natural world, Rousseau complains, the botanist would rather study the plants of Pliny or Linnaeus (OC, IV, 1202). The resulting autonomy produces an abstract botanical language whose terms neither resonate (in the original, acoustical sense of the word) with the reality they seek to describe nor correspond to Rousseau's ideal of being "expressifs, courts, sonores": "Rien n'étoit plus maussade et plus ridicule lorsqu'une femme ou quelqu'un de ces hommes qui leur ressemblent, vous demandoient le nom d'une herbe ou d'une fleur dans un jardin, que la nécessité de cracher en réponse une longue enfilade de mot latins qui ressembloient à des évocations magiques" (OC, IV, 1206-7).

The irresolvable tension or distance between the act of botanizing and botanical writing is no more apparent than in Rousseau's *Lettres sur la botanique*, an epistolary botanical lesson addressed to Mme Delessert and her young daughter. In a statement echoed in each of the eight letters, Rousseau strongly cautions against a reliance on the language of botanists: "Mais je vous préviens que si vous voulez prendre des livres et suivre la nomenclature ordinaire, avec beaucoup de noms vous aurez peu d'idées, celles que vous aurez se brouilleront, vous ne suivrez bien ni ma marche ni celle des autres, et n'aurez tout au plus qu'une connoissance de mots" (OC, IV, 1161). And yet, despite Rousseau's warning, botany as practiced in the eighteenth



century is fundamentally and inescapably concerned with the painstakingly precise nomination of the visible. Elsewhere, Rousseau himself writes: “Il faut en botanique commencer par être guidé; il faut du moins apprendre empiriquement les noms d’un certain nombre de plantes, avant de vouloir les étudier méthodiquement”<sup>2</sup>. Although Rousseau repeatedly tells Mme Delessert that the focus of his botanical lesson is not on the rote learning of arbitrary plant names but rather on an understanding of the structure and organization of plant forms, this knowledge requires a meticulous cataloguing of the discrete parts of the plant. Indeed, Rousseau takes a certain amount of pleasure in naming the various plant structures, in minutely detailing, for instance, the subtle differences between the stamen or the corolla in different plant classes, and in listing the varying local names for a particular plant.

The full complexity of the relationship between “la langue de la chose” and “la chose” is revealed in the final letter to Mme Delessert. Rousseau chastises himself for having been too abstract and points to the inadequacy, the secondariness of his botanical descriptions: “Si j’avois commencé par vous en mettre une [plante] sous les yeux je vous aurois épargné une application très fatigante sur un objet imaginaire et à moi des descriptions difficiles auxquelles un simple coup d’oeil auroit suppléé” (OC, IV, 1191). Rousseau’s solution is to propose the creation of a herbarium – a text whose characters are the plants themselves: “...je ne suis pas à la portée de vous montrer du doigt les objets; mais si chacun de notre côté nous en pouvons avoir sous les yeux de semblables, nous nous entendrons très bien l’un l’autre en parlant de ce que nous voyons” (OC, IV, 1191). The inadequacy of the herbarium as a transparent mode of representation, the inability of the plants once dried and mounted to speak for themselves, is quickly revealed when Rousseau insists on supplementing the plants with his own descriptions: “C’est à moi de vous les nommer, de les classer, de les décrire” (OC, IV, 1191)<sup>3</sup>. In fact,

2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Correspondance complète de J.-J. Rousseau*, ed. Ralph Leigh, Oxford, The Voltaire Foundation, 1972-1984, # 5725.

3 For a discussion of Rousseau’s herbariums see Lisa Gasbarrone, “The Book of Nature: Rousseau’s Floral Collections and the Text,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, xxviii, 1, 1988, pp. 27-41.

Rousseau does include within his own various herbariums the name of the plant in Latin, a brief, prosaic description of the plant, and, most remarkably, a representation of that plant in his own non-linguistic botanical nomenclature consisting of 1210 algebraic symbols – a system he ultimately rejects, according to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, because this pasigraphy “ne lui présentait que des squelettes”<sup>4</sup>. Although botanical writing, like all forms of writing for Rousseau, must inevitably founder in its attempt to be anything other than a mark of difference, the resoluteness with which Rousseau studies the language of botany testifies to his strong need to find a new, radically different system of signs that might somehow be authentic.

It is worth noting that Rousseau’s botanical writing coincides with work on his last two major autobiographical texts, the *Dialogues* (1772-1776) and the *Rêveries* (1776-1778). Indeed, there appears to be a compelling coincidence between Rousseau’s conception of the scientific rhetoric of botanical writing and the rhetorical ideals of a language that would give a true representation of the self. For Rousseau, botanical writing is valorized for its simplicity and objectivity, qualities which point to its truthful and authentic nature, whereas classical rhetoric, with its figural and syntactic complexity, is associated with artificiality and ornamentation. Rousseau applies this distinction within his own botanical works. For him, the leaf is equivalent to falsifying masks of societal convention – “Une plante n’est pas plus sûrement reconnoissable à son feuillage qu’un homme à son habit” (OC, IV, 1193) – while the flower contains the hidden, elusive, and delicate “mistère” embodying the essence or character of the plant (OC, IV, 1163). Furthermore, by focusing on the particular object, the botanist recognizes the uniqueness and individuality

4 Jacques-Henri-Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, *Oeuvres Complètes*, IV, ed. L. Aimé-Martin, Paris, Méquignon-Marvis, 1818, p. 253. After crediting Rousseau with the good sense to give up on any attempt to create a language that perfectly transcribes the natural world, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre goes on to consider positively the possibility of such a language. “Il ne s’agirait que d’y introduire des accents, pour rendre les nuances des couleurs, et toutes les modifications des saveurs, des parfums et des formes” (251-267).

of that object even while relating it to other surrounding objects. Similarly, Rousseau seeks to find a language that would convey the particularity of his self – a task he finds impossible within the abstract and formulaic language of social convention.

Looking more specifically at Rousseau's own botanical descriptions, one can see the flower as an emblem of the natural, authentic self Rousseau seeks to recover in his autobiographies. As Marcel Raymond and Jean Starobinski have remarked, the flower for Rousseau represents an intact and innocent nature before it has been mutilated, deformed, or denatured by man<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, as if to embody Rousseau's ideal of transparency, the flower magnificently displays itself concealing nothing beneath its surface. Indeed, the study of natural history is a study of external, *visible* nature. Rousseau passionately rejects the sciences of geology and anatomy because they require an intrusive and ultimately destructive probing beneath the surface (OC, I, 1066-9)<sup>6</sup>. When one looks more closely at Rousseau's description of the flower in his *Dictionnaire*, the association between plant and natural self becomes even more pronounced. Rousseau's definition focuses on the differing sexual characteristics among various plant classes. This in itself is not at all unusual; most contemporary botanists, including Linnaeus, identified the sexuality of the plant (male, female, asexual, androgynous, and hermaphroditic) as the primary organizing category in their classificatory schema. Yet, for Rousseau, the hermaphroditic plant, viewed by most botanists as a monstrous, even provocative, deviation, is regarded here as the ideal, most complete flower. Rousseau admires its virtual self-sufficiency (it needs no other plant to reproduce). He thus reasons that the plant must exist without any external desires. Corresponding, as one critic has noted, in certain respects with the state of

5 See Marcel Raymond, Introduction to *Les Rêveries*, in OC, IV, lxxiii-xcv and Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle*, Geneva, Gallimard, 1971<sup>2</sup>, pp. 278-282.

6 For further discussion of this topic see Pierre Saint-Amand, "Rousseau contre la science: l'exemple de la botanique dans les textes autobiographiques", *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 219, 1983, pp. 159-167.

Rousseau's hypothesized primitive man before he enters society and becomes dependent upon others for his survival and his needs (and has a less rigidly-defined and narrowly-circumscribed sexual identity and sexually-determined role)<sup>7</sup>, the flower also represents the ideal of complete self-sufficiency which Rousseau seeks to regain in the *Rêveries*: "...ne trouvant plus d'aliment pour mon coeur sur la terre, je m'accoutumois peu à peu à le nourrir de sa propre substance et à chercher toute sa pâture au dedans de moi" (OC, I, 1002). Thus, the radically autonomous status of the self in the *Rêveries* – the work opens with the declarative "Me voici donc seul sur la terre" – coincides with the ideal plant form as described in Rousseau's botanical writing.

Rousseau's definition of the flower also suggests a model for self-representation. Whereas the established botanists of the period, such as Linnaeus, defined the flower by regarding it as a fixed object which could be broken into its constitutive parts, Rousseau locates the essence of the flower in its becoming; he did not see the flower as a static, unchanging entity, but one that evolves over time: "Je crois que le défaut général vient ici d'avoir trop considéré la fleur comme une *substance absolue*, tandis qu'elle n'est, ce me semble, qu'un être collectif et relatif ... la fleur ne me paroît être que *l'état passager* des parties de la fructification *durant* la fécondation du germe..." (OC, IV, 1223, emphasis mine). The temporal representation of the flower in Rousseau's botanical work is analogous to the historical methodology employed in the *Confessions*. Rousseau's description of the flower can clearly be read as an allegory of the self: "...il faut en suivre les fleurs dès avant leur épanouissement jusqu'à la pleine maturité du fruit, et c'est dans cette *succession* qu'on voit des métamorphoses et un *enchaînement de merveilles* qui tiennent tout esprit sain qui les observe dans une continuelle admiration"

7 Lisa Gasbarrone, "Innocent Deceptions': Botany in the Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau", diss., Princeton University, 1984, pp. 157-60. See in particular the third chapter entitled "The State of Nature". Gasbarrone argues that Rousseau's description of plant life in his botanical works is analogous to the life of natural, pre-societal man as described in the *Second discours*.

(OC, IV, 1185-6, emphasis mine). One need only substitute “self” for “flower” to create a statement heard throughout the *Confessions*. Rousseau speaks, for instance, of “la chaîne des sentimens ... [qui] ont marqué la succession de mon être” and elsewhere states, “Il y a une certaine succession d’affections et d’idées qui modifient celles qui les suivent ... Je m’applique à bien développer par tout les premières causes pour faire sentir l’enchaînement des effets” (OC, I, 277; 174-5, emphasis mine). Rousseau goes on to insist that the flower cannot be analyzed by studying its parts separately, but by considering each part in relation to the others as they develop over time, thus echoing his desire to have the various aspects of his life understood in context, arguing that the truth of the self lies not in the facts themselves but in the relation of these facts to the unfolding narrative. It can hardly be a coincidence that Rousseau’s intense interest in botany began only two years before the composition of the *Confessions* in 1766.

While Rousseau’s botanical findings offer a suggestive model for the representation of self in the *Confessions*, it is the actual activity of the botanist – the observing, collecting and naming of plants – which serves, I would argue, as a central metaphor for the specifically autobiographical act of writing in the *Rêveries*. The following description of the botanist taken from the seventh *Promenade* is particularly illustrative:

La botanique est l’étude d’un oisif et paresseux solitaire: une pointe et une loupe sont tout l’appareil dont il a besoin pour les observer. Il se promène, il erre librement d’un objet à l’autre, il fait la revue de chaque fleur avec intérêt et curiosité, et sitôt qu’il commence à saisir les loix de leur structure il goûte à les observer un plaisir sans peine aussi vif que s’il lui en coûtait beaucoup. Il y a dans cette oiseuse occupation un charme qu’on ne sent que dans le plein calme des passions mais qui suffit seul alors pour rendre la vie heureuse et douce: mais sitôt qu’on y mêle un motif d’intérêt ou de vanité, soit pour remplir des places ou pour faire des livres, sitôt qu’on ne veut apprendre que pour instruire, qu’on n’herborise que pour devenir auteur ou professeur, tout ce doux charme s’évanouit... (OC, I, 1069).

The aimless, pleurably indolent wandering of Rousseau’s botanist and the casually unsystematic and disinterested nature of his observations perfectly characterize the production and design of the *Rêveries*.



Rousseau writes for no reader other than himself; like the botanist, he writes not to become an author, that is, to instruct and to inform others, but for his own edification. Similarly, the passivity of the botanist finds its equivalent in the abstention of the writer from all duty and from all engagement with the outside world – “m’abstenir est devenu mon unique devoir” (OC, I, 1000). Rousseau’s project, simply put, is to study himself for himself, to understand and accurately record “l’état habituel de [son] ame” (OC, I, 1002). In order to do so, Rousseau adopts a freely wandering discourse and rejects any pre-established structure or methodology: “Je dirai ce que j’ai pensé tout comme il m’est venu et avec aussi peu de liaison que les idées de la veille en ont d’ordinaire avec celles du lendemain... je laisse ma tête entièrement libre, et mes idées suivre leur pente sans résistance et sans gêne” (OC, I, 1000-2); he describes his writing at its most structured as a faithful register of the modifications of his soul – a register, however, without any order or governing system.

In addition, Rousseau often uses natural terms to characterize his writing; for instance, he avoids the literary term “page”, and instead frequently uses the word “feuille” (“leaf”) in reference to his autobiography, thus effectively conflating the materials of the botanist and of the writer: “Ces feuilles ne seront proprement qu’un informe journal de mes rêveries” (OC, I, 1000). And as Lionel Gossman indicates, the tools of the botanist mentioned above – the magnifying glass and the stylus – can be read as metonymies of the tools of the writer, namely the eye and the hand<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, even the cognitive structure of daydreaming, of the *rêveries*, that ideal state of consciousness in which Rousseau is most fully himself and which he seeks to inscribe, is similar to the activity of the botanist: the word “rêverie” is a form of “rêver” which comes from the Latin verb *reexvagere*, and means to roam in a carefree and idle manner from place to place<sup>9</sup>. Rousseau nicely brings both senses of the word together when he describes his own thought process as a kind of

8 Lionel Gossman, “The Innocent Art of Confession and Reverie”, *Daedalus*, 107, 1978, pp. 59-77.

9 Marcel Raymond, *op. cit.*, p. lxxvi.



grazing, that is a gentle, more or less systematic, but thorough movement along the surface: “mon esprit fait sa pature journalière [des sentiments et des pensées] dans l'étrange état où je suis” (OC, I, 1000). In addition, the terms used to characterize the activity of botanizing (“délassement”, “amusement”) and the effects it can produce (“ravisements”, “extases”) are identical to those used in relation to the *rêveries*. The benefits are also similar: both activities transport Rousseau away from his perceived enemies and back to a time and place in his youth when he felt at one with himself and his surroundings.

It is ultimately in the material products of Rousseau's solitary self-examination and botanical observations, namely the text of the *Rêveries* on the one hand, and the *herbier* on the other, that the metaphoric equivalence between both activities is most clearly marked. Both texts operate as a system of signs which recall a past presence, or what Starobinski calls a *signe mémoratif*<sup>10</sup>. Describing the role of the herbarium, Rousseau writes:

Toutes mes courses de botanique, les diverses impressions du local des objets qui m'ont frappé, les idées qu'il m'a fait naître, les incidens qui s'y sont mêlés, tout cela m'a laissé des impressions qui se renouvellent par l'aspect des plantes herborisées dans ces mêmes lieux ... maintenant que je ne peux plus courir ces heureuses contrées je n'ai qu'à ouvrir mon herbier et bientôt il m'y transporte. Les fragmens des plantes que j'y ai cueillies suffisent pour me rappeler tout ce magnifique spectacle (OC, I, 1073).

In a similar fashion, the reading of each *Promenade* serves to evoke the essence of particular mood or experience: “Je fixerai par l'écriture [les contemplations] qui pourront me venir encore; chaque fois que je les relirai m'en rendra la jouissance ... [la] lecture [de mes Rêveries] me rappellera la douceur que je goûte à les écrire, et faisant renaitre ainsi pour moi le tems passé doublera pour ainsi dire mon existence.” The verb “fixer” used above is particularly evocative of the process whereby the plants are fastened by delicate ribbons to the page of the herbarium (OC, I, 999,1001).

10 Jean Starobinski, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

To be sure, the collecting and recollecting of flowers and memories are not perfectly isomorphic activities. The study of botany is, after all, concerned with objects not ideas. In the seventh *Promenade*, for instance, botanizing serves to distract the overly-agitated and paranoid imagination of Rousseau by fixing his attention on the minute details of the plant world, thus enabling the tranquil state of mind conducive to *rêveries*. Having achieved this ideal state of consciousness, Rousseau relies on the gaze of the botanist, with its persistent focus on the particular, to provide an anchor lest he lose himself in an endless, solipsistic spiral completely detached from reality – a state Rousseau likens unto death. The relation between self-knowledge and self-inscription and botany, then, is not one of perfect equivalence. Nonetheless, botanizing becomes, I hope to have shown, a central metaphor for both consciousness and the act of writing for an author who would write shortly before his death: “J’herboriserai, mon Cher hôte, jusqu’à la mort et au-delà”<sup>11</sup>.

\* \* \*

In Goethe’s *Geschichte meiner botanischen Studien*, an essay which traces the formative influences on the author’s developing botanical thought, Rousseau plays a surprisingly prominent role. Goethe particularly admires Rousseau for the exactitude of his botanical descriptions, his attention to only those plants which he has seen with his own eyes (as opposed to other botanists such as Buffon who relied heavily on second-hand travel accounts and sketches), and his ability to effectively communicate his ideas to the amateur. After dedicating three pages to Rousseau (Linnaeus is allotted only two), Goethe concludes: “Soviel sei hier gesagt, um einigermaßen anzudeuten, was wir ihm in jener Epoche unsrer Studien schuldig geworden”<sup>12</sup>. Goethe’s laudatory assessment of Rousseau contrasts

11 Robert Thiery, ed., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Le philosophe botaniste*, Besançon, SNI Jacques et Demontrond, 1996, p. 89.

12 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Goethes Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, Vol. 13, ed. Erich Trunz, 8th rev. ed., Munich, C. H. Beck, 1974, pp. 157-160. This edition henceforth abbreviated in the text as HA followed by the corresponding volume and page numbers.

sharply with the wholly negative depiction of Rousseau that emerges in the *Italienische Reise*<sup>13</sup>, where he is criticized precisely for his failure as a naturalist:

Manchmal gedenke ich Rousseaus und seines hypochondrischen Jammers, und doch wird mir begreiflich, wie eine so schöne Organisation verschoben werden konnte. Fühlt' ich nicht solchen Anteil an den natürlichen Dingen und sah' ich nicht, dass in der scheinbaren Verwirrung hundert Beobachtungen sich vergleichen und ordnen lassen, wie der Feldmesser mit einer durchgezogenen Linie viele einzelne Messungen probiert, ich hielte mich oft selbst für toll (HA-11, 211).

Borrowing in part from the contemporary clinical diagnosis of the French philosopher as paranoid and delusional, Goethe's hypochondriac and demented Rousseau is unmistakably recognizable as that paragon of German sentimentalism, Werther. Goethe escapes from the impotent, solipsistic, and ultimately self-destructive dynamic of *Empfindsamkeit* which dooms Werther by sympathizing with the natural objects that surround him ("Fühlt' ich nicht solchen Anteil an den natürlichen Dingen") and not with the non-material objects of desire – God, transcendent love, immortality – which torment the sentimental soul<sup>14</sup>. More precisely, Goethe's sympathy is grounded in a specifically scientific methodology: like the surveyor, Goethe compares, arranges, and takes measurements of the natural world around him.

- 13 The *Italienische Reise* is based largely on notes and letters written during Goethe's stay in Italy from September 3, 1786 to June 18, 1788. The first part, relating his journey from Carlsbad to Rome, was written in 1816; the second part, relating his journey from Rome to Naples and Sicily, was written in 1817; and the third part, relating his second, nine-month stay in Rome, was only written in 1829. It is important not to confuse Goethe's journey in Italy with the *Italienische Reise*. For a detailed study of the differences between the notes and letters written during his stay in Italy and the *Italienische Reise* see Melitta Gerhard, *Die Redaktion der "Italienischen Reise" im Lichte von Goethes autobiographischem Gesamtwerk*, Frankfurt, Jahrbuch des Freien Deutschen Hochstifts, 1930.
- 14 Even when Werther apparently contemplates nature, it is nothing other than a mirror of his feelings and unfulfilled desires. He, therefore, does not truly sympathize with the natural objects. For an emblematic example of Werther's sentimental perception of nature see HA-6, 9 (Letter of May 10).

Indeed, Goethe's descriptive style in the *Italienische Reise* employs many of the principles of the natural historian: objects, natural as well as cultural, are depicted in a simple, calm, and measured style betraying little emotion; they are described only as they relate to the visual senses (the sense of taste, touch, smell, and hearing are rigorously excluded); and, finally, the chief focus of the descriptions is on the object's color and geometric form as well as its spatial relation to the surroundings. Despite this scientific approach, Goethe's descriptions are strongly personal. Goethe has no intention of being exhaustive: he frequently contrasts his selective descriptions to those found in the numerous, comprehensive guidebooks on the region. Instead, he seeks to capture only those objects and features which immediately impress themselves upon him: "Von Venedig ist schon viel erzählt und gedruckt, dass ich mit Beschreibung nicht umständlich sein will, ich sage nur, wie es mir entgegenkömmt" (HA-11, 67). Goethe allows the objects themselves to become the active agents as he recedes into the background. Yet the goal of Goethe's disciplined seeing is not self-forgetting but self-knowledge: "Ich mache diese wunderbare Reise nicht, um mich selbst zu betriegen, sondern um mich an den Gegenständen kennen zu lernen" (HA-11, 45). In the following section, I would like to consider the connection between a natural historical mode of observation and an education of the self through Goethe's extensive interest in natural history during his stay in Italy.

On the most fundamental level, the *Italienische Reise* is the story of a self emerging out of emotional, intellectual, and poetic crisis. Goethe describes his state shortly before leaving Weimar in terms of poetic impotence and a desperate struggle for life: "Ich kämpfte mit Todt und Leben und keine Zunge spricht aus was in mir vorging" (HA-11, 561). In stark contrast to the momentous nature of Goethe's journey, the narrative opens with a matter-of-fact reportage of Goethe's dramatic escape from Carlsbad at three in the morning followed by a mineralogical analysis of the roadside, a geological assessment of the landscape, and a meteorological account of the weather and cloud formations. Goethe then literally gets his bearings by determining precisely the latitude of his current position. Throughout the *Italienische Reise*, landscapes which are emotionally, symbolically, or culturally charged with significance for Goethe, such as Vesuvius or the

Brenner Pass (the border between Germany and Italy), are fastened onto with the critical eye of the naturalist. The crossing of the Alps inspires a theory of atmospherics, the descent into Italy becomes a botanical expedition, and the ascent of Vesuvius is a chance to study lava flows. In the artist Tischbein, Goethe's reluctant companion to the volcano, Goethe sees a representative of a more aesthetically-determined, anthropomorphic, and subjective approach to nature:

Ihm, dem bildenden Künstler, der sich nur immer mit den schönsten Menschen und Tierformen beschäftigt, ja das Ungeformte selbst, Felsen und Landschaften, durch Sinn und Geschmack vermenschlicht, ihm wird eine solche furchtbare, ungestalte Aufhäufung, die sich immer wieder selbst verzehrt und allem Schönheitsgefühl den Krieg ankündigt, ganz abscheulich vorkommen ... Tischbein fühlte sich nunmehr auf dem Berge noch verdrüsslicher, da dieses Ungetüm, nicht zufrieden, hässlich zu sein, auch noch gefährlich werden wollte (HA-11, 192-3).

Goethe, however, ignoring the apparent chaos (and danger) around him, seeks to understand the laws which govern the sudden, violent, and destructive action of the volcano. By discovering a general law of change which could in some way reconcile the "shapeless heap of things" with the overall geological development and structure of the earth, Goethe, I would argue, hopes to be able to integrate his own crisis into the narrative of his life<sup>15</sup>. (That all formations no matter how monstrous and aberrant must somehow be linked together through a law-governed developmental process is one of the chief tenets of the natural historian.) Goethe's scientific approach to Vesuvius should not be read, then, as a surrender of the subject to a kind of anesthetizing, reassuring, detached objectivity, but an attempt to explain his own seething passions in the continuum of his life. To be sure, as W.H. Auden has remarked, Goethe obscures his immediate reaction to objects such as the volcano with banal and vague adjectives such as "schön", "wichtig", and "interessant" and

15 For a detailed examination of the role of Vesuvius in the *Italienische Reise* and of the various geological developmental theories such as neptunism and vulcanism which Goethe explores see Hartmut Böhme, "Goethes Erde zwischen Natur und Geschichte: Erfahrungen von Zeit in der *Italienischen Reise*", *Goethe-Jahrbuch*, 110, 1993, pp. 209-225.



keeps the sensory and emotional apart in his descriptions<sup>16</sup>. But Goethe's strict focus on objects aims at an understanding of the eternal laws which govern their production – laws which he believes can be extended, though in complex ways, to all natural products, including art, society, and man himself.

Goethe's fascination with Vesuvius (he makes the ascent three times) is part of a much larger and more general interest in geology. Throughout the *Italienische Reise*, Goethe carefully notes down the geological structure and mineralogical composition of the landscape. The collecting of rocks is even presented as a strange kind of temptation: Goethe, on numerous occasions, vows not to weigh himself down with rocks, yet finds himself at the end of his journey with too many to transport home. Goethe's geological fascination is best understood through a reading of "Über den Granit" (1784), a chapter-fragment intended originally as part of a never-completed natural historical novel modeled on Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and written only two years before the journey to Italy. In it, Goethe renounces his earlier poetics and declares granite to be his new muse:

Ich fürchte den Vorwurf nicht, dass es ein Geist des Widerspruches sein müsse, der mich von Betrachtung und Schilderung des menschlichen Herzens, des jüngsten, mannigfaltigsten, beweglichsten, veränderlichsten, erschütterlichsten Teiles der Schöpfung, zu der Beobachtung des ältesten, festesten, tiefsten, unerschütterlichsten Sohnes der Natur geführt hat ... Mit diesen Gesinnungen näherte ich mich euch, ihr ältesten, würdigsten Denkmäler der Zeit (HA-13, 255).

Like many of his fellow scientists, Goethe assumes that all rock forms precipitated as crystals out of a primal liquid of which the original deposition was granite. For Goethe, then, granite becomes a substance, both ordinary and existent, which can place him in a relation of unmediated contact with the essence of nature and of himself:

Hier ruhst du unmittelbar auf einem Grunde, der bis zu den tiefsten Orten der Erde hinreicht, keine neuere Schicht, keine aufgehäuften zusammengeschwemmte

16 W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, introduction, *The Italian Journey*, by J.W. Goethe, New York, Schocken Books, 1968, p. xv.



Trümmer haben sich zwischen dich und den festen Boden der Urwelt gelegt ... [diese Gipfel] sind vor allem Leben und über alles Leben. In diesem Augenblicke, da die innern anziehenden und bewegenden Kräfte der Erde gleichsam unmittelbar auf mich wirken, da die Einflüsse des Himmels mich näher umschweben, werde ich zu höheren Betrachtungen der Natur hinaufgestimmt, und wie der Menscheng Geist alles belebt, so wird auch ein Gleichnis in mir rege, dessen Erhabenheit ich nicht widerstehen kann (HA-13, 255).

Although in the *Italienische Reise* Goethe would thoroughly abandon the romantic pathos pervading this passage, the symbolic import of granite remains just as strong. Significantly, Goethe's journey begins on a highway of excellent granitic sand ("es lässt sich keine vollkommeneren denken") whose material provides "einen festen Grund und ein schönes Bildungsmittel" (HA-11, 9-10). Goethe literally grounds himself in the one stable element as he sets off into the unknown. Granite acts as a kind of transhistorical or always present touchstone allowing him to be at home in his travels of place and time.

The assiduous study of mineralogy also provides access to that which is permanent and essential in art. Contemplating the ruins of Nero's palace in Rome, Goethe is unable or unwilling to imaginatively reconstruct the past grandeur of the palace for there is no guarantee that this mental recreation will be anything more than a phantasm which threatens, in turn, to become an unattainable artistic ideal. Instead, turning his attention to the concrete, physical remains, those elements present in the sensuous here-and-now, Goethe diligently collects samples of the stones from which the palace was built in the belief that intimate knowledge of these materials will provide a surer and more secure route to aesthetic understanding: "Auf den Ruinen des Neronischen Palastes... konnten [wir] uns nicht enthalten, die Taschen vollzustecken von Granit, Porphyr und Marmortäfelchen, die zu Tausenden hier herumliegen und von der alten Herrlichkeit der damit überkleideten Wände noch als unerschöpfliche Zeugen gelten" (HA-11, 138). In Goethe's approach, there is no dangerous imaginative leap: the route from the ruins to whatever was permanent or essential in the ruins, that greatness of which everyone speaks but which is no longer directly observable, can be safely navigated through an objective study of the ruins' materials. His study, however, does not aim at an archeological

reconstruction of the palace from the remaining fragments; instead, it seeks to examine the very materiality of the stones, that is, their mineral composition, the only part of the palace which remains unchanged and undamaged by time, in an attempt to come into contact with the building's essential quality<sup>17</sup>. Tellingly, Goethe opens the "Römische Elegien", the most famous reflection on his years in Italy, by invoking the stones upon which Rome is built – "Saget, Steine, mir an..." (HA-1, 157).

It is with a similar logic that Goethe refuses any historical mediation in his understanding of place. While touring the Sicilian city of Palermo, Goethe is accompanied by a local guide who recounts in detail the ancient battle between Metellus and Hasdrubal in 251 BC, in an attempt to evoke the spirit of the land. After sternly rebuking the inept guide, Goethe turns away from history to natural history:

Er verwunderte sich sehr, dass ich das klassische Andenken an so einer Stelle verschmähete, und ich konnte ihm freilich nicht deutlich machen, wie mir bei einer solchen Vermischung des Vergangenen und des Gegenwärtigen zumute sei.

Noch wunderlicher erschien ich diesem Begleiter, als ich auf allen seichten Stellen, deren der Fluss gar viele trocken lässt, nach Steinchen suchte und die verschiedenen Arten derselben mit mir forttrug. Ich konnte ihm abermals nicht erklären, dass man sich von einer gebirgigen Gegend nicht schneller einen Begriff machen kann, als wenn man die Gesteinsarten untersucht, die in den Bächen herabgeschoben werden, und dass hier auch die Aufgabe sei, durch Trümmer sich eine Vorstellung von jenen ewig klassischen Höhen des Erdaltertums zu verschaffen (HA-11, 233).

Goethe's move from the guide's classical memories to the rubble of what he describes as the "eternally classical mountains" marks a dramatic relocation of the aesthetic from a primarily historical to a wholly natural, extra-cultural origin. For Goethe, ancient art and

17 Much like the dried and mounted flowers in Rousseau's herbarium, the rocks, those "inexhaustible witnesses" of the palace, are signs which are materially identical to the object to which they refer. Taken out of their natural setting, placed within a scientific context (Goethe had an enormous rock collection consisting of over 16000 samples), and organized according to a rigorous classificatory system, these objects become permanent markers for a lost or transitory presence.

architecture is great because it most perfectly imitates and integrates the laws of nature into its structure. Broadly considered, Goethe views art as a combination of arbitrary, changing historical circumstances and necessary, permanent natural laws – laws which are more or less carefully observed in different time periods<sup>18</sup>. Accordingly, while in Italy, Goethe does not seek to imitate blindly the works of art he contemplates but to study the universal aesthetic laws they so transparently display. As Stuart Atkins points out, Goethe's absolutist aesthetics is not elegiacally neo-classical: St. Peter's church is described as grander and bolder than any of the ancient temples<sup>19</sup>. Tellingly, Palladio, a sixteenth-century Paduan architect, becomes one of Goethe's greatest influences precisely because of his ability to integrate timeless aesthetic principles with contemporary social, political, and cultural elements.

The shift from the historical to the natural is most marked upon Goethe's return to Rome from Sicily. Over a period of a week, Goethe decides to tour the city as a tourist might, focusing not on any particular style or time period (as he usually did), but on the major attractions. During this general tour Goethe first comes into contact with the full greatness of Rome: "Mir ward bei diesem Umgang das Gefühl, der Begriff, die Anschauung dessen, was man im höchsten Sinne *die Gegenwart des klassischen Bodens* nennen dürfte. Ich nenne dies die sinnlich geistige Überzeugung, dass hier das Grosse war, ist, und sein wird" (HA-11, 456, emphasis mine). The aesthetic ideal is located not in any one style or building, subject inevitably to the ravages of time and taste, but rather in the "eternally classical soil" upon which Rome is founded. Greatness can be had in any age, is Goethe's reassuring conclusion, as long as the artist learns how to perceive the timeless aesthetic laws residing in the natural world.

18 Goethe makes this relation explicit in the *Italienische Reise*: "Diese hohen Kunstwerke sind zugleich als die höchsten Naturwerke von Menschen nach wahren und natürlichen Gesetzen hervorgebracht worden. Alles Willkürliche, Eingebildete fällt zusammen, da ist die Notwendigkeit, da ist Gott" (HA-11, 395).

19 Stuart Atkins, "Italienische Reise and Goethean Classicism", *Aspekte der Goethezeit*, ed. Stanely A. Corngold et al., Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977, p. 85.

While Goethe's work as a natural scientist provides him with a conceptual framework for reinterpreting his position within the cultural world order, his specifically botanical efforts reward him with a model he adapts to interpret his own individual development as a creative artist during his stay in Italy. Goethe's great botanical revelation, fully articulated in the scientific treatise *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1790) shortly after his return from Italy, can be summarized as follows: the various sections of the plant, such as the calyx, the flower, the stem-leaves, and the seed, are considered to be different manifestations of an identical organ referred to early on as the "Urpflanze" and then simply as the "Blatt"; this archetypal organ, though existent, is never fully embodied in any part of the plant; instead, it most clearly manifests itself in the commonality of each single plant section when compared with the others; the metamorphic laws which govern the differences between the parts of a plant Goethe will later call polarity ["Polarität"] and intensification ["Steigerung"]; the former describes the alternating expansion and contraction of leaf-forms, the latter the leaf-forms' increasing refinement<sup>20</sup>. I would like to suggest that Goethe applies the botanical laws governing the plant's metamorphosis to structure the story of his own transformation or *Bildung* in the *Italienische Reise*. The first two parts of the *Italienische Reise* relate Goethe's travels from Carlsbad to Rome and then on to Naples and Sicily. The narrative is driven by a consciousness striving to break out of its self-enclosed, tightly circumscribed world and open itself up to a larger field of experience. This expansion of the boundaries of the self is literally characterized by a wide-eyed willingness to take in and absorb the multitude of sensory impressions from the outside world (Goethe frequently describes himself as traveling with wide-open eyes). This process of *Bildung* through a kind of expansive receptivity is succinctly described upon his return to Rome: "Ich bin fleissig und nehme von allen Seiten ein und wachse von innen heraus" (HA-11,

20 For one of the best accounts of Goethe's botanical theory of morphology see Ronald H. Brady, "Form and Cause in Goethe's Morphology", *Goethe and the Sciences: A Re-Appraisal*, ed. F. Amrine et al., Boston, D. Reidel, 1987, pp. 257-300.

350). Using an architectural metaphor, Goethe describes his transformation in Italy as a simultaneous expansion and ennoblement of his previous self: "Ich bin wie ein Baumeister ... [der] seinen Grundriss sucht zu erweitern, zu veredeln..." (HA-11, 150). Even the landscape reflects the self's widening circumference: the blue skies in Italy are vast and expansive, while the gray skies in Weimar are oppressive and confining. In contrast, the third part of the *Italienische Reise*, which relates Goethe's ten-month stay in Rome before his return to Weimar, is characterized by an increasing contraction or limiting of the self: "Es geht mit mir jetzt eine neue Epoche an. Mein Gemüt ist nun durch das viele Sehen und Erkennen so ausgeweitet, dass ich mich auf irgendeine Arbeit beschränken muss" (HA-11, 420-1). To be sure, Goethe's restless and ever-active intellect hardly obeys this dictum: he no sooner gives up one field of inquiry than he engages in another. He also continues to avidly "take in" the sights: "mein Gedächtnis füllt sich voll unendlich schöner Gegenstände" (HA-11, 369). Nonetheless, there is throughout this final section an increasing sense of limit or constraint. Goethe speaks often of his numerous "defects" ["Kapitalfehler"] and definitively renounces his apprenticeship as a visual artist. The story of Goethe's renunciation of his passion for the married and hence unobtainable "schöne Mailänderin" runs through and sets the tone for the third part of the *Italienische Reise* and prefigures his departure from Rome, the ultimate act of renunciation.

Goethe's transformation can also be considered in terms of the archetypal organ, the "Urpflanze". Goethe repeatedly characterizes his change while in Italy as radical: "... und ich zähle einen zweiten Geburtstag, eine wahre Wiedergeburt, von dem Tage, da ich Rom betrat"; "...so mein' ich, bis aufs innerste Knochenmark verändert zu sein" (HA-11, 147;146). Yet, like the "Urpflanze", which is implicitly manifest in each stage of the plant's growth, some more permanent, essential self survives Goethe's complete re-creation. Thus, Goethe can write at the end of his stay in Italy without contradiction, "Da ich durch die lange Ruhe und Abgeschiedenheit ganz auf das Niveau meiner eignen Existenz zurückgebracht bin, so ist es merkwürdig, wie sehr ich mir gleiche und wie wenig mein Innres durch Jahre und Begebenheiten gelitten hat"; "Niemand kann sich umprägen und



niemand seinem Schicksale entgehn" (HA-11, 525; 383). When Goethe intuited the existence of the "Urpflanze" he called it the key to everything; its principles, he remarked, could be applied to all living things (HA-11, 374-5). While it would be reductive to describe Goethe's overall development as a creative artist and as an individual through the metaphor of the plant, it is essential to note that the botanical laws Goethe discovered during his Italian trip provide him with a basic framework for understanding, conceptualizing, and later narrating the changes within himself at a time of fundamental crisis in the *Italienische Reise*.

At the heart of Goethe's investment in the natural sciences and a natural historical, object-oriented mode of observation and description is a search for self-knowledge through a knowledge of natural objects. Only after gaining an understanding of the natural world through a relentless suppression of subjectivity (symbolized by his travelling incognito) does he reflect the results of his inquiry back upon himself and apply the ordering principles he has discovered to his own life and place in the world. Goethe's crisis is thus integrated into a general law of change. In contrast, Rousseau's solitary botanizing serves not as a way to bring him in closer contact with the world, but to further enclose and isolate him within his own subjectivity. Nature acts as a mirror which reflects an idealized, purified, authentic image of Rousseau back to Rousseau. And botany functions much like a magnifying glass: it enables Rousseau to contemplate in detail his own reflection in the mirror. For both Goethe and Rousseau, the attempt to view things as they are through the gaze of the natural historian serves to promote a more complete knowledge of self and the botanical flower becomes a metaphor for that self. While for Goethe, the flower is a discovery which crystallizes his understanding of self and its relation to the world, for Rousseau the flower is objective proof that his authentic self, under attack from the outside world, actually exists.<sup>21</sup>

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## Résumé

Cet article est consacré à Goethe et à Rousseau, deux écrivains majeurs qui adoptent un mode de description relevant de l'histoire naturelle dans le but de retrouver, au-delà de la vaste tradition allégorique et symbolique qu'ils ont héritée, l'objet lui-même dans sa réalité propre, ce que Wallace Stevens appellerait "the plain sense of things". J'espère démontrer que cette volonté de se rapprocher de l'objet à travers la langue propre à l'histoire naturelle constitue en fait une tentative d'échapper aux modèles du néoclassicisme français et du sentimentalisme allemand pour ouvrir la voie à une nouvelle poétique et à une nouvelle expression de l'être. Il est certainement significatif que l'activité du botaniste figure en bonne place aussi bien dans les *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* de Rousseau que dans l'*Italienische Reise* de Goethe, deux écrits autobiographiques qui ébauchent de nouvelles possibilités esthétiques et esquissent les contours du sujet moderne. Mon analyse de Rousseau est basée sur ses *Lettres sur la botanique* et sur son *Dictionnaire de botanique*, tout spécialement l'article "Fleur"; elle propose une relecture de certains passages clés des *Confessions* et des *Rêveries* à la lumière de son travail scientifique. Dans le cas de Goethe, j'analyse deux de ses grandes préoccupations scientifiques, à savoir ses infatigables collections et analyses de minéraux et sa recherche de l'inaccessible "Urpflanze", dans leur relation avec sa formulation de l'identité du sujet et de la *Selbstbildung*.