

1-1-2011

An Unlikely Marriage: Theorizing the Corporeality of Language at the Crossroads of Thoreau, Heidegger and the Botanical World

John Charles Ryan
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011>



Part of the [Philosophy of Language Commons](#)

Ryan, J. C. (2011). An unlikely marriage: Theorizing the corporeality of language at the crossroads of Thoreau, Heidegger and the botanical world. *Philosophy Study*, 1(2), 139-149. Journal website available [here](#)

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011/494>

An Unlikely Marriage: Theorizing the Corporeality of Language at the Crossroads of Thoreau, Heidegger and the Botanical World

John Charles Ryan
Edith Cowan University

This paper examines the relationship between language, particularly language that expresses aesthetic experiences of plant life, and corporeality. The theorisation of language is a keystone towards conceptualising participatory relationships between people and the botanical world. A comparative reading of the works of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Heidegger provides a framework for approaching language as embodied participation. Despite political differences, Thoreau and Heidegger shared a mutual conviction about the generative powers of language. Thoreau's literary practice partly involved immersion in places such as swamps and forests. Fittingly, Heidegger's explication of Rilke's concept of "the Open" mirrors the participatory aesthetics of Thoreau. Both thinkers looked towards the capacities of poetics to galvanise the evolution of language. In response to the increasing dissection offered by contemporaneous theories of linguistics, Thoreau and Heidegger held the notion of language as a body in itself, one brought to life through immanence between sensuous bodies in the world. For each theorist, language was both *bodily* and *a body*. Their works evidence that multi-sensorial encounters with the natural world can be captured in language. The body of language may be engaged with as a whole living phenomenon rather than a dissected corpse as this comparative reading of Thoreau and Heidegger will intimate.

Keywords: Thoreau, Heidegger, corporeality, language

1. Introduction

By the 25th of May this bud [of the sweet flag], before it has blossomed and while yet tender, is in condition to be eaten and would help to sustain a famished traveller. I often turn aside my boat to pluck it, passing through a dense bed of flags recently risen [*sic*] above the surface. The inmost tender leaf near the base of the plant is quite palatable, as children know. They love it as much as the musquash does. (Thoreau, *Faith in a seed* 184)

Commonalities between the works of Thoreau and Heidegger provide the foundation for theorizing an approach to language. Heidegger claims that "in its essence, language is neither expression nor an activity of man Language speaks" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 194). An enigmatic and potentially productive phrase "language speaks" attributes agency and immanence to words. The assertion dislodges language from scientific categorisation as a conduit of information or the rote output of internal cognition. The statement gives corporeality to language as expression that engages sense-bearing bodies to create experience. For Thoreau,

John Charles Ryan, a poet and Ph.D. candidate, the School of Communications and Arts, Edith Cowan University in Western Australia; main research fields: Environmental Philosophy, Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, Embodiment, Process Philosophy, Metaphysics, Literature and Philosophy, Poetics, and Aesthetic Philosophy. Email: jryan9@our.ecu.edu.au.

language, habitats and bodies coalesce in an inseparable whole. Rather than distant speculation, his poetic interaction with plant life intimated that language underpins embodied interaction with the natural world. This is because language is neither a passive medium of communication to be processed and received by the rationalistic self nor a mechanical manifold of grammatical structures to be analysed. A comparative reading of Thoreau and Heidegger offers a coherent way to navigate the diversity of language forms. Poetic language, for both thinkers, creates experience, rather than objectively accounting for it. Heidegger's claim that "language speaks" represents a critical principle. Documents can become living expressions of values, moods, inclinations, perceptual preferences and bodily experiences. Although a language may be a hundred years old, it breathes pulses, sings and clamours. It is clearly animate, not dead. One's engagement with those languages is not an act of resuscitation, but of intermingling between one's senses invoked and the living words.

As David Levin argues, although Martin Heidegger was not a prominent critic of ocular-centrism, he took a "very critical position with regard to the everyday experience of seeing and the ocular centric metaphysics which reflection on this experience has brought forth" (186). In asserting that "language speaks", Heidegger demonstrates a shift in his thinking away from "vision-generated discourse to a discourse formed by listening" (Levin 186), or being attentive to the stimuli of one's surroundings. The consequence of a focus on what is seen is the problematic prioritization of the formal surface beauty of the natural world. Aesthetic language, in its ocular-centric forms, composes the world as artefactual scenes—paintings, photographs or landscapes—of diction. The western tendency is to communicate about the natural world in particular in surface-oriented terms or functional scientific language, rather than spiritual, cultural, medicinal, gustatory or multi-sensorial poetics. When we taste a plant in the field, can language speak this? At what point does "vision-generated discourse" constrain a participatory aesthetics of flora? This paper maintains that language can be a measure of variation and change in the human experience of the botanical world.

2. When Language Speaks, Who Listens?

"Does he paint? He fain would write a poem, / Does he write? he fain would paint a picture". (Browning 2590, lines 67-68)

Heidegger's contention that "language speaks" presents a critical conceptual position in language. Indeed, the answer to the question of "who listens" provides a glimpse into the philosophy of language of Thoreau and Heidegger. Language may be conceptualised as immanent and autonomous—as a body. Both thinkers would concur that a poetic disposition towards the natural world enables a heightened ability to exert the many senses in generating embodied experiences. Rather than denoting specific forms for constructing words, poetic thought is a way of participating in sense-based meaning-making (Leggo 2007). This paper argues that, through its speaking, language invigorates receptivity, a listening to the sensuous possibilities of the world. As intrinsically connected to an experience rather than passively produced, language assumes a living function in the works of Thoreau. Critical reflexivity with words and an entrainment to the lingua of swamps, plants and forests were hallmarks of his interaction with the plant life of Concord, Massachusetts.

Thoreau theorised language in *Walden* (1966), first published in 1854, and the essay "Walking" (2007), first published in 1862. He later manifested these language theories in the unfinished manuscripts on forest ecology, published posthumously as *Faith in a Seed* (1993) and *Wild Fruits* (2000). Nearly a century after Thoreau's death, Heidegger also took a revelatory turn towards the poetic language within the larger conceptual

frameworks of *Dasein*—the philosophical project of being or personhood—in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) and *On the Way to Language* (1982). An uneasy but potentially productive relationship exists between Heidegger's and Thoreau's works. However, the characterisation of Thoreau as a "proto-Heideggerean" is outside of the scope of this discussion (Garber 1991). In his analysis of the connections among building, dwelling and cultivation, Frederick Garber observed Thoreau's "proto-Heideggerean recognition of the relations of being, dwelling, and location and what these have to do with being at home in the world" (146). At the same time, the philosophy of Heidegger provided "some useful tools with which to understand the matter of housing in Walden" (Garber 148). The idea of a "proto-Heideggerean" lineage between the philosophical thought of a nineteenth-century American transcendentalist and a twentieth-century German phenomenologist warrants recognition as a possibility, but it deserves to be developed elsewhere.

In the essay "Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau" by Stanley Cavell (2000), the yin-yang interplay between dark and light encapsulates the simultaneous tension and complementarity between their works. Cavell points to the concern that, despite synergistic theories of language, both theorists mark radically different political persuasions. Thoreau practiced the constructs of language that Heidegger would later propound through an embodied approach to language and the plant world. Cavell characterises Thoreau as a thinker who "matches, I would say uncannily, so many of the philosophical configurations of Heidegger, while reversing his political sensibilities" (46). The question of Heidegger's philosophy with reference to his Nazi allegiances has been a perennial debate amongst scholars of the history of philosophy (Wolin 1993). Their paradoxical alignment is that, whereas Heidegger may be seen as an example of a philosopher with problematic politics, Thoreau's paradigm of civil disobedience would later influence important social activists such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr..

Recognizing this framework of political differences, the potential complementarity between their linguistic philosophies merits deeper consideration. Both thinkers considered language as an experience, rather than merely a vehicle for describing experience objectively. Moreover, both were preoccupied with the limitations of constructing the natural world visually in words. Translated as "configuration" or "enframement", the principle of *Ge-stell* underscores a concern for the increasing influence of imagistic thinking on the two-dimensional conceptualization of the natural world (Heidegger 1977). The implication of *Ge-stell* is the pictorialisation of living phenomena. Heidegger contends that hierarchical power structures result from the reduction of the felt world to pictorialised space: "The fundamental event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture. The word 'picture' now means the formation of presenting production. Within this formation, the human fights for the position in which he can be that being that provides the measure for all beings, and draws up the guidelines" ("The Age" 221).

Jennifer Ham and Matthew Senior suggest that *Ge-stell* connotes "the exploitive, instrumental representation at the core of technology, the 'enframement' of nature as a vast reservoir of energy to be stockpiled and spent" (2). Heidegger's project of language is to resist the depiction of the world in structural terms, intrinsic to the hegemony of "vision-generated discourse" (Levin 186).

In its manifold forms, language has been conceived of in western thought as a technical medium. Conceivably, Thoreau and Heidegger could have been responding to their respective intellectual currents that propounded linguistic reductionism. In 1798, the French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac claimed that "every language is an analytic method and every analytic method is a language" (qtd. in Whewell 462). The early twentieth-century structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure compared language to other

societal systems: “A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms of politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems” (15).

Saussure proposed semiology as the scientific method of analysing language or “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology” (15). According to de Condillac and Saussure, language conveys thoughts that are conceptually produced in the mind and systematically issued as an assemblage of signs through the actions of the mouth, eyes and hand. Such linguistic theory presupposes that language mediates the unspoken inner life and the perceptible outer world through the output of the language products—speech, prose or transcripts.

Both Thoreau and Heidegger conceived of language as a living body, instead of a manifold of parts comprising a machination. Engagement with the body of language yields something considerably different to interaction with its anatomised constituents. For Thoreau, physical immersion in swamps, forests and mountains inherently dispelled the illusion of distance between the subjective self and the objective other that extends to the objectification of language. The sounds, smells, tastes and sensations of the plant world were sensed directly through his sense organs and skin. However, Thoreau’s idea of language as immanence contradicts the construction of language as a mechanical outcome. Similarly, Heidegger contested the narrow conceptualisation of language as the “audible utterance of inner emotions, as human activity, as a representation by image and by concept” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 191). Heidegger responded to the assumption that language is “the expression, produced by men, of their feelings and the world view that guides them” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 194). Thoreauvian and Heideggerean language is more than a technical conglomeration of syllables and sentence structures yielding a means to communicate verbally.

Heidegger maintained that the reduction of language into products is part of a scientific epistemology that maintains the primacy of “grammar and logic, philosophy of language and linguistics” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 191). Not only an anatomy, but language is a physiology through which ideas, emotions, sensations and values are formed, gestated and continually reappraised. Language may thus be approached as a living body. While having the capacity for palpability, poetic language may also entail slippage of certainty and other desirable tensions with what it expresses. Hence, Heidegger challenged the assumptions of technical linguistics for an animated sense for language as the fabric of experience itself; and he suggested the essential human ability to “undergo an experience with language” (*On the Way to Language* 57). Rather than describing experience from a distance, language generates experience inherently, and so becomes experience. Though subtle, this distinction is central to Heideggerean phenomenology. When language speaks, experience is given shape through a physiology of interaction between words and flesh. Varieties of experience clarify during language-intensive encounters.

However, do all forms of language speak in the same way? Who listens? For Heidegger and Thoreau, poetic sensibility enables a participation in language in a manner comparable to two living bodies engaging in sensory exchange. Both philosophers classify language according to its somatic affect, rather than its visible structure as verse or prose. In fact, Heidegger recognised no taxonomic distinction between poetry and prose: “Poetry proper is never merely a higher mode (*melos*) of everyday language. It is rather the reverse: Everyday language is a forgotten and therefore used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer... Pure prose, is never ‘prosaic’. It is as poetic and hence as rare as poetry” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 205).

The prose writings of Thoreau retrospectively typify Heidegger’s thesis that poetry is not necessarily a

higher mode of language structured in line breaks. Thoreau's writings are quintessential examples of poetic prose that reveals embodied interactions with plants and habitat consciousness. He was a poet of plants for whom language was an essential way to know non-human life.

3. Language, Vision and Flora: Towards "the Open"

By the "Open", therefore, I do not mean sky, air, and space; they, too, are "object" and thus "opaque" and closed to the man who observes and judges. The animal, the flower, presumably is all that, without accounting to itself, and therefore has before itself and above itself that indescribably open freedom which perhaps has its (extremely fleeting) equivalents among us only in those first moments of love. (qtd. in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 105)

The concept of "the Open" is instructive here. Thoreau and Heidegger seek to galvanise experience through poetic language. Correspondingly, Rainier Maria Rilke distinguished between being "*in the world*" and standing "*before it*" (italics in original), which results from the assertion of human reason which "observes and judges". "Sky, air, and space" of which "the animal, the flower" are part, are closed off to us through the exclusive attention to seeing and evaluating. Rilke offered the suspension of observing and judging towards sensuous participation in the natural world. Whereas the diction of aesthetics tends to visually frame and thereby block us off from plants, sensuous participation enraptures us in "sky, air, and space... the animal, the flower".

In contrast, category-driven language, such as taxonomy, enframes plant life with prescriptive aesthetic values or scientific discourse. From such a perspective, a tree is beautiful or ugly—and taxonomically *Eucalyptus marginata*—but not indeterminate, mutable or mysterious. Categorical language conceptualises the world as external. In contrast to science, poetic writing can offer the manifold of a tree at a particular moment expressed through bodily meaning without epistemological closure. Heidegger explicated that "if we, therefore, assign language to a philosophy of language, then we are immediately already seized by a certain determinate conception" (*Logic as the Question* 12). Yet, through a reconfiguration of language, determinate conceptions can be softened and made sensual and bodily.

A prism through which language can be read is for its visual content because language is correlated intensely to sight. Martin Jay characterises the relationship between images and words as "the complicated interlacing of language and vision" (395). Such linkage has a biological, rather than cultural, rationale in which "unlike the other senses of smell, touch or taste, there seems to be a close, if complicated, relationship between sight and language, both of which come into their own at approximately the same moment of maturation" (8). However, authors, like Marcel Proust in such works as *Swann's Way* (2008), first published in 1913, depart from the visual crafting of prose towards the immanence of the auto-centric senses. The unravelling of the "complicated interlacing" requires a conscious bodily effort. As etymology reminds us, the word *language* derives from *lingua*, for the tongue. Language is something tasted, smelled, touched and embodied in the gestures of limbs, facial expressions and repose of the chest. Taste occurs on the tongue as the transmitter of audible language and the receptor for sensory inputs.

The trouble with ocular-centric language is that landscapes, which were once embodied spaces where people could nourish themselves from wild flora, are constructed as "visual taxonomies" (Lenman 93). Surface-oriented depictions of the plant world are abundant in popular culture as illustrations, photos and botanical desiderata, and also as the aesthetic language of beautiful appearances. As visual appreciation only,

aesthetics posits a categorical apprehension. However, “the Open” illuminates multi-sensoriality in space. For Heidegger, language reaches into “the Open” when loosened from two-dimensional structuring. Thoreau and Heidegger argue compatibly that poetic writing broadens the narrow experience of sight towards bodily contact. “The Open” prompts a distinction between the externalization of the world and the participation in experience through language. Heidegger maintained that “the Open” “means something that does not block off. It does not block off because it does not set bounds. It does not set bounds because it is in itself without all bounds. “The Open is the great whole of all that is unbounded” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 104). As closed systems, the aesthetics of the beautiful, picturesque and sublime sets bounds on perception by compartmentalising experience. “The Open”, in contrast, entails gesture and contact between sentient bodies in which living beings are drawn together centripetally. Heidegger argued that “the Open” is a state of wholeness that: “Let’s the beings ventured into the pure draft draw as they are drawn, so that they variously draw on one another and draw together without encountering any bounds.... They do not dissolve into void nothingness, but they redeem themselves into the whole of the Open” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 104). As “the whole of all that is not objective”, “the Open” broadens the botanical world constructed by scientific thought or aesthetic evaluation as an objective matter (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 104).

Heidegger’s sense of “the Open” was practiced by Thoreau *avant la lettre* as habitat immersion of, and through, the senses. Thoreau’s interaction with local plants dismantled perceptual distance while also invoking the limits of bodies. Thus, his aesthetics comprised a form of body-engaged judgement. For instance, though appearing glossy and attractive, a berry can be toxic, nauseating or too tough to chew. Thoreau drew consistently on the interplay between bodily interaction and distant speculation *vis-à-vis* the local flora of Concord. Thoreau writes: “I *eat* the high blueberry, but I am also interested in the rich-looking, glossy-black chokeberries, which nobody eats and which bend down the bushes on every side—sweetish berries, with a dry and so choking taste [*italics in original*]” (*Wild Fruits* 66). Although the berries reflected desirable forms and colours, they were not pleasing to the local palate. As a mode of botanical enquiry, Thoreau’s body intervened by tasting the uncelebrated chokeberries and making his own conclusions.

As implied by this excerpt, language gestates aesthetics while potentiating aesthesis as sensation. As contact between the bodies of people and plants, sensation takes place in “the Open”. Language reveals gradations of interaction, the ways in which we announce the natural world in images, and the ways in which bodily sensation interrupts visual systematising. Heidegger writes that the natural world is more than a collection of visually perceived phenomena: “In what the senses of sight, hearing, and touch convey, in the sensations of colour, sound, roughness, hardness, things move us bodily, in the literal meaning of the word. The thing is the aistheton, that which is perceptible by sensations in the senses belonging to sensibility” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 25). Extending Heidegger, participatory experience in “the Open” depends on language. Heidegger propounded the view that words in themselves constitute activities and cannot be separated from what they denote: “When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word ‘well’, through the word ‘woods’, even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 129).

Entering into the Open, for Heidegger, necessitated a “dialogue with poetry”, which risks becoming “an unscientific violation” of analytical scholarship (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 94). But as a union of opposites, poetic thought and analytical thought may be brought “into the most extreme discord and so to establish their concord” (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 96). Such reconciling tension between discord and concord

occurs in “the Open”. Thoreau’s practice of “the Open” in Concord, Massachusetts entailed syncretism between botanical science and somatic enquiry and between appearances and embodiment, both conceptualised as dialogic. Poetic thought brings us bodily into “the Open” where the flower already is at home. “The Open” is the field of contact in which multi-sensorial participation promotes bodily aesthetics, such as tasting wild berries in conjunction with viewing the fruits visually as beautiful objects.

4. Language, Senses and Flora: Botanical Metaphor

What flavour can be more agreeable to our palates than that of this little fruit, which thus, as it were, exudes from the earth at the very beginning of the summer, without any care of ours? What beautiful and palatable bread! I make haste to pluck and eat this first fruit of the year, though they are green on the underside, somewhat acid as yet, and a little gritty from lying so low. I taste a little strawberry-flavoured earth with them. I get enough to redden my fingers and lips at least. (Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed* 188)

Thoreau’s approach to plants engaged multi-sensoriality and language in relation to “the Open”. Botanical metaphor is an expression of the triadic interrelatedness among language, flora and the senses. Thoreau resisted the standardisation of language in which the derivation of words is buried behind the sheen of popular diction. In a letter from 1857, Thoreau lamented the sterilisation of lived experience by stock means of communication: “How shall we account for our pursuits, if they are original? We get the language to describe our various lives out of a common mint” (qtd. in West 747). Prefiguring Heidegger, Thoreau witnessed the systemisation of language, especially as the theories of the French Enlightenment began to influence American literature (West 1984). In contrast to the structuring of language by semiotics, Thoreau advocated universal language of which human verbal expression is only a part: “In all the dissertations on language, men forget the language that is, that is really universal, the inexpressible meaning that is in all things, everywhere” (qtd. in West 749).

So began Thoreau’s life-long pursuit of language immanence through the diction “in all things”, including the sounds, tastes and aromas of plants. The chapter “Sounds” in *Walden* opens with “we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard. Much is published, but little printed” (Thoreau, *Walden; and Civil Disobedience* 75). Thoreauvian language is not the rote transmission of internal states to the external world, but a mode of participatory engagement which broadens the bearers of language to include swamps and forests. In lieu of semiotic coding, the language of all things speaks immanently. Biologist and author Gary Nabhan observed that: “Thoreau became obsessed with ‘learning the language of these fields’ in the years just prior to his death. For him, the forest was a book waiting to be read: One simply had to devote sufficient time to grasp its grammar, to learn the rhythms of its syntax” (xvi).

For Thoreau, the forest was also a body poised to be sensed. The experience of a forest became inseparable from language and bodily sensation. From a perspective that continuously cross-bred linguistics and natural science with poetry, the flowering of a plant, the groan of a bog and the taste of a wild apple were kinds of language to be felt by Thoreau (Sellers 1999). His urgent task amounted to the tracing the language of all things into poetic prose: to etch his bodily experience of the sounds, smells, tastes, textures and images of habitats into written words. His subsequent literary projects embodied this belief that language is not only in the parlour or the lecture hall as “audible utterance”, but endemic to the swamp and the woodland. Language speaks from all corners, and hence nature was brought into cultural domains. His task would admit neither intellectual distance nor the comfort of visual speculation; it necessitated physical engagement and

experiential immediacy.

A concern with the integrity of words was at the heart of Thoreau's approach to language. He read the linguistic philosophies of the French Enlightenment, including Antoine Court de Gebelin's assertion that each vowel relates to a distinctive sense (West 764). Multi-sensorial language was a vital aspect of Thoreau's philosophy of the written word and the natural world. In "Walking", Thoreau propounded a theory of language reflecting Heidegger's claim that language speaks sensuously: "Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet, who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved" (29). This passage conveys the idea that language is a shared faculty of human expression and the natural elements. Thoreau wove literary language and the processes of ecology together as one of the first expressions of the need for the voice of the nature in American literature (Murray 1995). The final sentence is the most concise statement of Thoreau's position on language as closely bound to the "primitive senses". The poet hammered words back to their origins and through to their roots after language has been jostled out of place by popularisation, commercialisation, globalisation and parlour-speak. Thoreau sought a primeval bodily language. The relationship between a farmer and the land symbolises the pragmatic physical conjunction between corporeality and words.

Botanical metaphor is one mode through which Thoreau and Heidegger mutually theorise the meeting of language, senses and flora. A botanical metaphor may be defined as the use of an anatomical part or ecological process of a plant as a trope for a cultural process or concept. One of the more prevalent botanical metaphors in postmodern thought is the rhizome, which "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, inter beings, intermezzo. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance, uniquely alliance" (Deleuze, and Guattari 27). The rhizome counters the dominant growth-oriented and hierarchical metaphors of modernity by "burrowing through substance, fragmenting into simultaneous sprouts, moving with a certain stealth, powerful in its dispersion... [destabilising] the conventions of origins and endings" (Kaplan 87).

Preceding the onset of postmodernity, Thoreau made use of botanical metaphor, after theorising the purpose of language as "nailing words to their primitive senses". Thoreau went on to use floristic figures of speech to propound linguistic ideas. The "poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service" would also be one:

Who derived his words as often as he used them—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature. (Thoreau, *Walking* 29)

This excerpt consists of three major botanical tropes that characterise the project of restoring sense immanence to language: "with earth adhering to their roots"; "like the buds at the approach of spring"; and "to bloom and bear fruit there". Though "smothered", language speaks through certain kinds of literature as it blooms and bears fruit on the dusty page. This language is in "sympathy with surrounding Nature" that is closely attuned to the smells, sounds, tastes, textures and sights of flora. Such language takes us out of the strictures of the parlour and into the botanic field where the senses create bodily posture rather than visual prospect, where the "bodily eye" Thoreau spoke of becomes a *hexis* of visceral engagement. Although the medium of the page goes stale, poetic language blooms and fruits with the earth still at its roots.

In the same way, Heidegger's work deploys plant metaphors in theorizing language. Plants epitomise Heideggerean phenomenology as *physis* in which their existence is intrinsically a process of standing forth and going back, revealing and concealing. A process-oriented nature of plants contrasts with *Ge-stell* as the enframing of a moment in the life cycle of a plant. Andrew Feenberg argued that a plant symbolises: "Rootedness in the earth from out of which it emerges. It stands forth from the earth by going back into the earth, sinking its roots into its source. This double movement—standing forth and going back—characterizes the specific motility of living things" (30).

Hölderlin's elegy "Bread and Wine" uses the metaphor of a flower: "Now for it words like flowers leaping alive he must find" (qtd. in Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 100). The poetic thinker finds "words like flowers" just as he or she brings "words to their primitive senses". Hölderlin's phrase was taken up by Heidegger to characterise language as "the flower of the mouth. In language the earth blossoms toward the bloom of sky" (*On the Way to Language* 99). Thus, Heideggerean language engages the processes of the earth, and blossoms just as a plant flowers.

In his final analysis, language defines "the Open" as "language is the house of Being" (Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 63). Both Thoreau and Heidegger maintain an uncanny concurrence that language's immanence depends on processual fluctuation linked to human experience. Conceivably, the plant is a core metaphor for Heidegger's phenomenological project. The flower is an essential trope for expressing immanence as the arrival to the senses in bloom. Poetic thinking reflects the *physis* of the living plant "standing forth and going back" as a process since "all reflective thinking is poetic, and all poetry in turn is a kind of thinking" (Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* 136). As with Thoreau, the processes of concealment—dehiscence, the returning of plant energy to the root after wildflower season—and not concealment—flowering, and the boom of floral forms projecting towards the bloom of the sky, are etched in the grain of language. The works of Thoreau and Heidegger interweave poetry with the ecologies of plants towards botanical metaphors.

5. Towards a Language of Plants and Sensation

The gray blueberry bushes, venerable as oaks—why is not their fruit poisonous? It has the wildest flavour of any of the huckleberry tribe that I pluck. It is like eating a poisonous berry which your nature makes harmless. I derive some of the same pleasure from it as if I were eating the arum berries and musquash root with impunity, as if I were a Mithridates among the berries. (Thoreau, *Faith in a Seed* 199)

This paper has taken the position that, despite overt political misalignments, Thoreau and Heidegger reflect a mutual understanding of language as a body. Thoreau practiced Heidegger's aphorism that language speaks *avant la lettre* through dialogic participation in berry patches and woodlands. Correspondingly, Heidegger theorised the experience of enmeshing with the natural world as "the Open". Not only did Thoreau match "the philosophical configurations of Heidegger", he also put Heidegger's configurations into worldly practice (Cavell 46). Additionally, both philosophers theorise plants as central metaphors for their respective ontological aims. The philosophy of multi-sensorial interaction with the botanical world gestates in a current of language that is organic and transformational, and that is responsive and breathing, which houses the multiple senses and restores sensuality to the human experience of the plant world. Thoreau and Heidegger invite a critical position on language. Is the language taxonomic, visual, multi-sensorial, palpable, tactile, evocative, sensuous, emotional, or a hybrid of qualities? Is the language monolithic or heterogeneous? Does it take into

account multiple voices?

As language speaks, it reveals a relationship between vision and writing that is closely recursive. A language of sight undergirds what is perceived directly by the eyes as a striking scene, and what is recreated in the mind when the scene is no longer seen but expressed in words. At the threshold of seeing and sensation, aesthesis is a participatory ontology that breaks through the distance of culturally-constructed divisions between plants and people. Such oscillations between aesthetic modes would otherwise remain hidden behind pictorialized affect. Heidegger affirmed that the movement from a “covetous vision of things” to corporeal engagement is ultimately language-based: “The hard thing consists not only in the difficulty of forming the work of language, but in the difficulty of going over from the saying work of the still covetous vision of things, from the work of the eyes, to the ‘work of the heart’” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 136).

Sensation makes possible the intimacy with plants that has been excised by classical scientific and visual aesthetic language: “Intimacy obtains only where the intimate—world and thing—divides itself cleanly and remains separated. In the midst of the two, in the between of world and thing, in their inter, division prevails: a *dif-ference*” (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 199). The hybridic languages of the natural world are characterised by an unassailable flux between bodily incorporation and objective removal. A heightened level of appreciation encompasses the senses, synchronicity and diachronicity, as Heidegger said, the vision of objects and the work of the heart.

Works Cited

- Browning, Robert. “One More Word.” *A Library of the World’s Best Literature*. 1855. Ed. Charles Warner. Vol. VI: Brantome-Bulwer. New York: Cosimo Publications, 2008. 2589-92.
- Cavell, Stanley. “Night and Day: Heidegger and Thoreau.” *Appropriating Heidegger*. Eds. James E. Faulconer, and Mark A. Wrathall. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 30-49.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Continuum, 1987.
- Feenberg, Andrew. *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Garber, Frederick. *Thoreau’s Fable of Inscribing*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Ham, Jennifer, and Matthew Senior. Introduction. *Animal Acts: Configuring the Human in Western History*. Eds. Jennifer Ham, and Matthew Senior. New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-8.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Age of the World Picture.” Trans. Jerome Veith. *The Heidegger Reader*. 1938. Ed. Gunter Figal. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- . *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*. 1934. Trans. Wanda Gregory, and Yvonne Unna. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009.
- . *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter Hertz. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.
- . *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: HarperCollins, 1971.
- . “The Question Concerning Technology.” *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*. Ed. David Krell. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. 284-317.
- Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kaplan, Caren. *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement*. 1996. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Leggo, Carl. “Astonishing Silence: Knowing in Poetry.” *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues*. Eds. J. Gary Knowles, and Ardra Cole. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2007. 165-74.
- Lenman, Robin. “British Photographers and Tourism in the Nineteenth Century: Three Case Studies.” *Visual Culture and Tourism*. Eds. David Crouch, and Nina Lubben. Oxford: Berg, 2006. 91-108.
- Levin, David M. “Decline and Fall: Ocularcentrism in Heidegger’s Reading of the History of Metaphysics.” *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Ed. David Levin. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. 186-217.

- Murray, John. *Nature Writing Handbook: A Creative Guide*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995.
- Nabhan, Gary. "Foreword: Learning the Language of Fields and Forests." *Faith in a Seed: The First Publication of Thoreau's Last Manuscript*. Ed. Bradley Dean. Washington: Island Press, 1993. xi-xvii.
- Proust, Marcel. *Swann's Way*. 1913. Trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff. n.pag. Web. 2008. <<http://books.google.com>>.
- Saussure, Ferdinand D. *Course in General Linguistics*. 1916. n.pag. Web. 1986. <<http://books.google.com>>.
- Sellers, Christopher. "Thoreau's Body: Towards an Embodied Environmental History." *Environmental History* 4.4 (1999): 486-514.
- Thoreau, Henry D. *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*. Washington: Island Press, 1993.
- . *Walden and Civil Disobedience: Authoritative Texts, Background, Reviews, and Essays in Criticism*. 1854. Ed. Owen Thomas. New York: Norton, 1966.
- . *Walking*. 1862. LaVergne: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007.
- . *Wild Fruits: Thoreau's Rediscovered Last Manuscript*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000.
- West, Michael. "Thoreau and the Language Theories of the French Enlightenment." *ELH: English Literary History* 51.4 (1984): 747-70.
- Whewell, William. *The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences: Founded upon Their History*. Vol. 2. London, England: John W. Parker, 1840.
- Wolin, Richard. "'Over the Line': Reflections on Heidegger and National Socialism." *The Heidegger Controversy*. Ed. Richard Wolin. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993. 1-22.