

Writing Phytophilia: Philosophers and Poets as Lovers of Plants

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ABSTRACT This essay considers the effects of phytophilia (the love of plants) in philosophy and in literature through an analysis of texts by French thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau and by Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros. In his relation to vegetal beings, the phytophile philosopher grapples with something as elusive as *sophia*, namely the process of plant growth. Such an encounter radically changes the philosopher in that it opens his thought to the flux of becoming and metamorphosis, inaccessible from the standpoint of Western metaphysics. Like philosophers, phytophile poets are transformed by their love of plants. Through literary imagination, they can portray the being-in-the-world of plants, an experience that, in turn, will profoundly impact their poetic language and praxis.

Philo-phyto-sophia

The uneasy predicament of Western philosophy, which has, since the nineteenth century, had forebodings of its imminent end, resonates with the current global environmental crisis. The so-called “natural resources” are being exhausted in parallel with the reserves of metaphysics, already proclaimed depleted by Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. The spring of abstract theories, vying to explain the true nature of reality, dries up and inaugurates the epoch of nihilism, technologism, and technocracy roughly at the same time as global warming, deforestation, desertification, and the loss of biodiversity reach the point of no return. But, while metaphysics may survive in the mode of a monotonous self-iteration, ecosystems have no such luxury at their disposal, since the very metaphysical mindset that is now reaching a point of exhaustion has contributed to a dramatic reduction in their capacity for self-renewal.

In a quest for all-encompassing conceptual systems, philosophers have forgotten the ecology of thought, as much as the ecology of the physical environments they are a part of. In effect, they have grown oblivious to themselves *qua* philosophers, or the lovers of wisdom, to the extent that they have seen their mission in the possession and control of immutable truth. Only by reneging on its philosophical vocation could metaphysics justify and undersign the conversion of plants and animals

into raw materials at the disposal of humans. Wisdom, *sophia*, ceased to be the errant object of love, after which its lover was in a hot pursuit, for instance, in the Socratic dialogues. It became, instead, a matter of appropriation and secure possession, betraying the lover's intermediate position between knowledge and ignorance. *Sophia* was buried under the monumental categories of metaphysics, ideally exempt from the exigencies of transformation, movement, and growth. The inorganic constancy of true being dogmatically superseded the plant- and animal-like evanescence of wisdom.

The metaphysicians' conceptual allergy to growth explains the slanderous qualities they have ascribed to the growing beings *par excellence*, namely to plants. With very few exceptions, metaphysical philosophers have not been phytophiles (lovers of plants), and so were incapable of loving being as a whole. Aristotle's student Theophrastus was excluded from the Western canon for the painstaking botanical researches he undertook in *De Causis Plantarum* and *De Historia Plantarum*. Two millennia after that, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who admired Theophrastus as "the only botanist of antiquity" (*Reveries* 72), embraced philosophical phytophilia. Rousseau did not resort to this neologism, though he called the children of Madam Delessert, with whom he kept ongoing correspondence on the subject of botany, "botanophiles" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 150). In a letter to de Latourette, dated 17 December 1769, he applied the same designation to himself (*Collected Writings* VIII: 216).

Rousseau's *Reveries*, along with his botanical texts—comprised of a wealth of letters, fragments for a dictionary, and so forth—are certainly less known than his other works, such as *The Social Contract*, the two *Discourses*, or *The Confessions*. Recently, Alexandra Cook has masterfully contextualized these seemingly marginal writings within the rest of the philosopher's body of work and pointed out their place on the scientific scene of the eighteenth century. Our goal, in turn, is to show that these rather fragmentary discussions of botany can function as a conceptual laboratory for phytophilia. From the outset, let it be clear that Rousseau's love of plants is not the product of a naïve yearning to abolish the distance that separates humanity, corrupted by civilization, from nature. As Jacques Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology*, for Rousseau, whom he groups with the rest of Western metaphysicians, signification and representation are the supplements of presence, which they actually constitute, investing it with meaning (167). As such, these supplements could be trimmed down or brought back in touch with their purportedly natural foundations but never completely eliminated. What is at stake in all of Rousseau's works is

a meticulous calibration of (minimal but altogether irreducible) distances between presence and representation, nature and civilization, knowledge and ignorance. His phytophilia is an integral part of this endeavor that rebuffs, on the one hand, the metaphysical instrumentalization of the flora and, on the other, its fetishizing mystification.

According to the philosopher's own admission to Pierre-Alexandre du Peyrou, made in 1765: "I have more than ever a passion for botany" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 196). It is, however, a peculiar passion that cleanses the soul "of all irascible passions" and that serves the purpose of "preventing any seed of vengeance or hatred from taking root in my heart" (*Reveries* 70). Jean Starobinski justifiably ascribes a homeopathic effect to Rousseau's attitude to botany as the *remède dans le mal* (122), where careful scientific study combats the excessive abstractions of European sciences and, we might add, a passion for nature quells violent passions. The lover of plants takes after the character of his beloved objects with their presumed peacefulness, tranquility, and serenity. The stirring of his passion is to be extinguished in the passionless being of flowers he vicariously imbibes through their contemplation. The objects of botanical researches are conducive to "that precious Serenity of the soul" which they instill in the beholder (*Collected Writings* VIII: 173).

In spite of (or, better, thanks to) the rigorous scientific and conceptual apparatuses of botany and philosophy, Rousseau passionately desires to lose himself "like an insect among the grasses of the meadows" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 174). That is the second feature he borrows from the vegetable objects of his affection: depersonalization. While he likens himself to an insect, it is in the life of plants that Rousseau seeks a certain detachment from the self in a state that mingles philosophical and scientific objectivity with the botanist's melting into the world. Indeed, the path to philosophy, the way to the love of wisdom, cannot but wind through the love of plants producing a sense of depersonalization in the lover. As the poignant lines from the 1766 letter to the Duchess of Portland testify: "The study of nature detaches us from ourselves and elevates us to its Author. It is in this sense that one truly becomes a philosopher; it is in this way that natural history and botany have a use for Wisdom and for virtue. To put our passions off the track with the taste for beautiful knowledge is to chain love up with bonds of flowers" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 173). One's detachment from self spells out the strongest of attachments to (hence, the love of) God and nature; the divestment of passions leads to the ideal of objectivity; and the rechanneling of love to flowers synthesizes aesthetics and wisdom in the "beautiful knowledge" of botany.

For Rousseau, to love plants is to avoid, at any cost, turning them into the means for externally imposed, human ends. Militantly opposed to the reduction of plants to their medicinal properties (*Reveries* 72), he reports that the charm of botany evaporates once we “see plants simply as the instruments of our passions” (*Reveries* 78). Resistance to instrumentalization is a sure sign of love, aiming to save the singularity of the beloved from the temptation to assimilate it to the lover’s needs and desires. Similarly, philosophical love, respectful toward the singularity of wisdom, does not insert the beloved object into prefabricated systems of thought. Theory—notably in the Greek sense of *theoria*, meaning *vision of the divine*—does not provide us with a toolkit for meddling with the mechanics of existence. Were it to be useful, its charm would have evaporated as well. Its non-instrumental vision is far more ample than that knowledge which either cannot or should not be applied in “real life”: it is the very wisdom of the world and of every one of its inhabitants, including plants. Neither pure theory nor philosophical botany fits into the framework of manipulative, domineering knowledge, with which the metaphysical tradition is highly complicit.

Just as in his philosophical writings Rousseau stops short of calling for the end of civilization and signification, wherein he saw the reasons for our decadence and alienation from nature, so in his botanical texts he does not prohibit the scientific study of plants in the name of love. Botany is akin to art for art’s sake; it is, in effect, *l’art divin*, which fuels the love of nature. “I am as much a botanist,” Rousseau writes, “as anyone needs to be who wants to study nature with the sole aim of continually finding new reasons for loving it” (*Reveries* 77). The *ultima ratio* of botany is not epistemic but ethical—not the knowledge of plants it procures but the love of nature it reaffirms.

Besides cultivating non-instrumental sensitivity, how is the ethical mode of knowing possible? Rousseau’s botanical practice discreetly offers two solutions that, though apparently contradictory, safeguard the singularity of his beloved plants. The first is indicated in the title of his last major work, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Despite veiled allusions to his predecessor, René Descartes, who meditated alone by the fireplace in his study, Rousseau’s reveries are decidedly not meditations. There are ample differences between the two thinkers. The one is stationary in a closed apartment, while the other roams the fields and the forests in the countryside; the one has freely chosen solitude, while the other “has by common consent been banished by the rest of society” (3). But the most significant methodological distinction is that meditations are deep and

structured thoughts, whereas reveries are superficial daydreams, full of haphazard allusions and random associations. In Rousseau's words, his reveries are "light and pleasant ideas [that] simply brush the surface of the soul, as it were, without stirring up its depths" (56). In the same manner, they barely graze the surface of their botanical objects, leaving just enough breathing room for non-appropriative love. Dislocation in environmental space both mirrors and facilitates the flux of ideas. It takes Rousseau little effort "to wander nonchalantly from plant to plant and flower to flower" (77) in the process of botanizing, but even more effortless is the contingent passage from one thought to another in the course of his reveries. Daydreams are, at the same time, induced by and analogous to the plants the dreamer encounters on his path. What they have in common is, precisely, the absence of depth, an essential superficiality, which prevents the object from being swallowed up and digested in the bowls of either physiological or psychic interiority.

The lightness of loving reveries is beneficial both for the phytophile and for the recipients of their affection. "[R]everie," Rousseau notes, "revives and amuses me, thought tires and saddens me; thinking has always been for me a painful and unappealing occupation" (70). The irony of this observation aside, what Rousseau means by "thought" here is metaphysical philosophy, with its castles built in the air and its constant dissatisfaction with beings as they are. Metaphysical speculation misses the fine grains of existence detected, by chance, in the reveries. But there is still another alternative to deep reflection, which is constitutively unable to love its objects: paying extreme attention to their singularity. This attunement may result in descriptions that will never exhaust the smallest details in the being described and, therefore, will keep its singularity intact. In a letter to a French statesman de Malesherbes, Rousseau juxtaposes this scrupulous analysis of "vegetal productions" to the preferred methodology of "minds accustomed to generalize ideas and always to regard objects on a large scale" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 230). Turning a blind eye to singularity, metaphysicians will be impatient and ultimately bored with botanical studies.

For his part, having again confessed a passionate attraction to botany, Rousseau writes: "It is said that a German once wrote a book about a lemon rind; I could have written one on every grass in the meadows, on every moss in the woods, and on every lichen covering the rocks [...]" (*Reveries* 51). The least impressive of plants—grasses, mosses, and lichens fall into the spotlight of the phytophile's loving attention. Furthermore, their specimens represent much more than particular examples of the genus

to which they belong. Rousseau's stated desire is to write a book on *every* grass, *every* moss, *every* lichen as a unique plant in its own right. Calling for a description without an end, such respect for vegetable singularity derails the usual procedures of botanical classification and the systematizing drive, so abhorrent to the phytophile. The spirit of the reveries is that of radical empiricism.

The inimitability of every plant and of every plant part is an echo of Leibniz's law of "the identity of indiscernibles." In the Leibnizian universe, there are no two perfectly identical leaves, no two blades of grass that are completely alike, as each actualizes a unique aspect of divine substance. Generally sympathetic to the philosophy of Leibniz, Rousseau shares this view of the world: "with every new blade of grass I come across, I contentedly say to myself: 'There's yet another plant'" (*Reveries* 70). "Yet another" is, in this context, the opposite of "more of the same." Rousseau's contented expression implies that each blade of grass is a wholly different plant, to the point of being a species of its own, even if certain family resemblances may be identified as the "habits" or general aspects of related plants (Cook 193). Radical botanical empiricism hinges on a continual detection of novelty in the flora—a sure sign of love, whereby the lover can never get tired, nor have enough, of the beloved. Putting systems of classification on the verge of the unclassifiable, it performs a delicate balancing act that risks dissolving the "homeopathic" (in Starobinski's felicitous expression) science of botany in a non-scientific, wholly embodied, peripatetic practice.

In addition to pinpointing the inimitable in the most banal of vegetal specimens, phytophilia rejuvenates the thinking of the plant lover. Rousseau confesses that his "taste for plants" overwhelms him "to the point that it becomes the passion of a child" (*Collected Writings* VIII: 246). Like an infant, he discovers the world each time as though it were for the first time. This, perhaps contrived, innocence fuses the reveries and the plants themselves as the models for the daydreamer's subjectivity. Despite these invocations of childhood and innocence, a more fetishistic dimension of phytophilia is surreptitiously active in Rousseau's texts. Consider the "great joy and ecstasy" he felt when he learned about "the structure and organization of plants and about the role of the sexual parts in the process of fertilization" (*Reveries* 52). Nothing could be further from the purity and tranquility imputed to the plants and their lovers than this intense interest in vegetal sexuality, especially because botany was "the most explicit discourse, in the public domain, on sexuality during the period" (Bewell 174). We cannot easily disentangle Rousseau's phytophilia from his

sublimated eroticism, or for that matter, omit mentioning dendrophilia, which is the un-sublimated human desire to have sex with trees (McAlpine and Dowdalls 2010).

The Socratic pursuit of wisdom, to be sure, also had unmistakable erotic overtones. In and of itself, a return to sexuality and to sexual difference, if only mediated through the reproductive parts of plants, is sufficient to awaken metaphysics from its slumber and to summon it back to philosophy, as practiced by the lovers of wisdom. More generally, however, the rejuvenation of thinking in phytophilia recovers the Heraclitean insight into the primacy of becoming and the inevitability of change—the two sworn enemies of Western metaphysics. During his fifth and the ninth walks, documented in *Reveries*, Rousseau embraces the fluidity of *what is*: “Everything on earth is in a state of constant flux. Nothing keeps the same, fixed shape, and our affections, which are attached to external things, like them necessarily pass away and change” (55). With a slight variation, he repeats this idea later on in the book: “Everything on earth is in a continual flux, which allows nothing to take a constant form. Everything changes around us. We ourselves change, and nobody can be sure of loving tomorrow what he loves today” (94). Phytophilia, too, is not ensured against the capriciousness of affections.

Rousseau knew this full well, having on several occasions sold his herbaria and botany books, and having written to de Latourette in January 1770: “It is over, Sir, for me with botany [...]” (*Collected Writings* VIII: 216). Regardless of all these vicissitudes, it is the love of plants that imparts to us the love of change, seeing that their very being is defined by a constant metamorphosis (Goethe 6). It is hardly surprising that considerations of the ineluctable flux of things pepper a book of ever-shifting, quasi-kaleidoscopic reveries, themselves provoked by encounters with plants. Through superficial dreams and a passion for change, by depersonalizing the lover and attuning her to singularity, the love of plants opens thought to life.

Philo-phyto-poiesis

Literature was perceived, at least from European Romanticism onwards, as a site of resistance both to the techno-industrial reification of plants as raw materials and to the metaphysical edifice that sustained this commodification of vegetal life. If philosophy, with its traditional disregard for the here-below, its generalizing approach to thinking, and its anthropocentrism, justified the onslaught of the natural environment in the name of abstract concepts such as “Reason” or “Spirit,” the writings

of authors such as William Wordsworth or Novalis highlighted the organic ties binding human and non-human living beings. But Romantic literature was not without guilt in the metaphysical game of abstraction. The landscapes portrayed in Wordsworth's poetry were arguably as much the result of his personal observations as the distilled, artistic product of a set of clichés about nature. Similarly, Novalis's emblematic *blaue Blume*, one of the symbols of German Romanticism, epitomized, at the same time, the protagonist's beloved and poetry itself. Are plants doomed to self-effacement as perpetual stand-ins for something else, be it the material basis of industrial development or Romantic love? How can literature disentangle vegetal life from its symbolic meanings and, to borrow the phenomenological battle cry, go back to the plants themselves? In other words, what would be the protocols of a phytophilic *poiesis*?

To be sure, plants "as such" will forever elude us, as our understanding of their being is necessarily mediated by human sense-perception and scientific knowledge, not to mention a long cultural history of human-vegetal interaction, encompassing pastoral, georgic, and wilderness literature, as well as utopian and, more recently, dystopian visions of our coexistence with other living beings. Nevertheless, the inaccessibility of plant-life does not mean we should relinquish attempts to relate to plants on their own grounds, and even to learn from their specific mode of existence. In order to do so, we will need to ask ourselves, as a rejoinder to Thomas Nagel's query "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?," the question "What Is it Like to be a Plant?". This interrogation pins down the crux of phytophilia. To love a plant entails the desire to experience the world through its specific standpoint, all the while being aware of the impossibility of such a task given the sheer otherness of vegetal life. Do plants have 'experiences'? Do they even differentiate between themselves and the rest of the 'world'?

The expression of love through the impetus to turn into the beloved has been immortalized by renowned Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões (1524?–1580), who opens one of his most famous sonnets with the lines: "The lover turns into the beloved/By virtue of much imagining"¹ (297). One possible reading of Camões might insert this statement in a long phallogocentric line of male phantasies about the domination of women, the transformation of the poet into his beloved being just a more comprehensive way to appropriate and control female subjectivity. A more

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 1. Transforma-se o amador na cousa amada,/Por virtude do muito imaginar. All Portuguese poems are rendered in the authors' translation with the exception of the poems by Fernando Pessoa.

charitable interpretation of the sonnet, however, would highlight the lover's attunement to the being of his beloved and his readiness to give up his stable male identity in order to unite with the one who "gives shape" to his soul (297). Camões identifies imagination as the faculty that enables this transformation, while literature provides both a stage where the change can take place and an apt medium to carry out such an experiment.

As the realm of imagination *par excellence*, literature offers us an invaluable entry-point into the lives of plants. A phytophile writer can, like the lover in Camões's sonnet, imagine what it would be like to become a plant and strive to unite with the one she desires. But vegetal existence adds yet another layer to the becoming-plant of the phytophile poet. As noted above, plants are in permanent metamorphosis, in a constant process of becoming that moves away from the stability of entities described in metaphysical thought. If the love of plants amounts to a love of change and becoming, then, in the writer's attempt to become a plant, she is at her most plant-like.

What will this triangulation of love, imagination, and becoming-plant yield for literary praxis? Once we renounce the urge to make something out of plants, or to make plants into something, what will a vegetal-inflected poetic praxis look like? The writings of Brazilian poet Manoel de Barros (b. 1916) offer us a glimpse into a phytophilic *poiesis*. A native of Mato Grosso do Sul, located in the heartland of South America, Barros incorporates the lives of animals and plants into his poetry in such a way that the borders separating humans and non-humans become indiscernible. The result of this porous co-existence of different beings is a radically transformed poetic language that evinces the constant becoming-other of the poet.

The desire to become a plant stems from Barros's opposition to formal modes of thought that do not do justice to the variety of vegetal and animal beings. In a poem titled "Portrait of the Artist as a Thing," the writer delineates the contours of his transmutation into plants:

Portrait of the artist as a thing: butterflies
Already choose me over the trees
[...]
There is a vegetal heat in the voice of the artist.
He will have to twist his idiom to the point
of reaching the murmur of water in the leaves
of trees.
He will no longer have the ability to reflect about
things.

But he will have the ability to be those things.
He will no longer have ideas: he will have rains, afternoons, winds,
birds...

[...]

In order to see things without shape one needs
to know nothing.

One needs to enter into the state of a tree.

One needs to enter into the state of a word.²

(365; 367; 371)

For the poet, to become a thing is tantamount to turning into a tree, traditionally considered as thing-like because it does not share some of the traits that define humans, like motility or self-consciousness. Far from regarding the characteristics of trees as a negative counterpart to human existence, the poet expresses his wish to learn from vegetal life. His voice acquires a “vegetal heat,” as he strives to “twist his idiom to the point/of reaching the murmur of water in the leaves/of trees.” Not only the poet’s language but also his entire way of thinking, as open to vegetal influences as that of Rousseau, is changed by his transformation into a plant. He no longer reflects about his surroundings as a detached subject who endeavors to grasp an object lying outside it. His distance from things fades as he simply turns into them (“He will have the ability to be those things”), in a fluidity of being reminiscent of vegetal metamorphosis.

Barros’s views on thinking like a tree also come through in “Little Poem in a Playful Language”:

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2. Retrato do artista quando coisa: borboletas
Já trocam as árvores por mim.
[...]
Há um cio vegetal na voz do artista.
Ele vai ter que envesgar seu idioma ao ponto
de alcançar o murmúrio das águas nas folhas
das árvores.
Não terá mais o condão de refletir sobre as
coisas.
Mas terá o condão de sê-las.
Não terá mais ideias: terá chuvas, tardes, ventos,
passarinhos...
[...]
Para exergar as coisas sem feito é preciso
não saber nada.
É preciso entrar em estado de árvore.
É preciso entrar em estado de palavra.

He felt more pleasure in playing with words
than in thinking with them.
He could do without thinking.

When he was progressing into a tree he wanted to blossom.
He preferred creating a flowery turn of phrase to
creating ideas with words.³
(493)

Human thought is here rejected in favor of the simple pleasure of playing with language, a poetic version of reverie. Rather than instruments employed to express abstractions resulting from a highly codified relationship to the outside world, words are regarded as toys that allow the poet to experiment with “progressing into a tree.” In Portuguese, the poem’s playfulness comes through in the very structure of the second stanza that revolves around the terms “to blossom [*florear*]” and “creating a flowery turn of phrase [*fazer floreios*].” The desire of the poet-tree to blossom is equated to a poetic turn of phrase, which cannot be identified here with an empty flower of rhetoric. Rather, flowery turns of phrase are the ones that approximate the existing plants themselves and thus contrast with the generalizing ideas that are invoked in the last line.

The anti-intellectualist stance of Barros’s writing inherits a literary critique of metaphysical thought that, undoubtedly influenced by Rousseau, surreptitiously runs through various post-Romantic authors, from the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa to French poet Francis Ponge. Pessoa’s heteronym Alberto Caeiro declared in his post-pastoral poetry collection “The Keeper of Sheep” that “[t]o not think of anything is metaphysics enough”⁴, only to add, further down in the same poem:

Metaphysics? What metaphysics do those trees have?
Only that of being green and lush and of having branches
Which bear fruit in their season, and we think nothing of it.

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3. Sentia mais prazer de brincar com as palavras
do que de pensar com elas.
Dispensava pensar.

Quando ia em progresso para árvore queria florear.
Gostava mais de fazer floreios com as palavras do
que de fazer ideias com elas.

4. Há metafísica bastante em não pensar em nada (206)

We hardly even notice them.
 But what better metaphysics than theirs,
 Which consists in not knowing why they live
 And in not knowing that they don't know?
 [...]

 The only inner meaning of things
 Is that they have no inner meaning at all.⁵
 (49–50)

Pessoa posits the trees' being-in-the-world as a model for human behavior. Neither reflecting about their past situation nor speculating about the future, trees simply "are," keeping in tune with their surroundings and responding to present challenges and needs. They do not search for the hidden, metaphysical import of reality, wisely aware of the fact that the only meaning of things is the one that shows itself to us.

Still, it would be rash to interpret Pessoa's and Barros's take on abstract thought as a dismissal of thinking as such. True, Caeiro states that "[t]o think is to have eyes that aren't well,"⁶ given that "[t]he world wasn't made for us to think about it/[...] [b]ut to look at it and to be in agreement."⁷ Yet, this praise of thoughtlessness is immediately followed by the line: "I have no philosophy, I have senses..."⁸ (48). Sense-perception is substituted here for metaphysical considerations, inaugurating a novel, plant-inflected kind of thinking. Perception, understood as sensitivity to stimuli shared by humans, animals, and plants, is a mode of thought that does not aim to penetrate the "core" of things, or their "inner meaning," but remains essentially superficial, in that it registers only what is apprehended through the senses. But if Caeiro remains an admirer of plants who tries to imitate their non-rational thinking, Barros goes even further in embodying

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5. Metafísica? Que metafísica têm aquelas árvores?
 A de serem verdes e copadas e de terem ramos
 E a de dar fruto na sua hora, o que não nos faz pensar,
 A nós, que não sabemos dar por elas.
 Mas que melhor metafísica que a delas,
 Que é a de não saber para que vivem
 Nem saber que o não sabem?
 [...]
 O único sentido íntimos das cousas
 É elas não terem sentido íntimo nenhum. (207)
 6. pensar é estar doente dos olhos (205)
 7. [o] mundo não se fez para pensarmos nele/[...] [m]as para olharmos para ele e estarmos de acordo (205).
 8. Eu não tenho filosofia: tenho sentidos...

plant-like modes of perception: “Plants/taught me of the ground/I learned with the body”⁹ (123). His conclusion, in the poem cited above, is that in order to see things, “one needs to enter into the state of a tree.” Only by lovingly striving to become a tree, can one really think like one.

Barros’s phyto-metamorphosis involves a depersonalization that, akin to Rousseau’s detachment from the human self in nature, facilitates both vegetal thinking and the emergence of a plant-inflected poetic language. “Notebook of an Apprentice” comments on the process of learning to write poetry:

I wanted to be part of trees like
the birds.
I wanted to be part of dew like
the stones.
I just did not want to signify.
Because signifying limits the imagination.
And with little imagination I would not be able
to be part of a tree.¹⁰
(473)

Signification is incompatible with the poet’s desire to be part of a tree, since it presupposes a separation between the signifier and the signified and therefore thwarts the process of identification with plants. Similarly to the move away from metaphysical thought, though, Barros’s critique of meaning does not amount to a rejection of language as such. He suggests that human signification is an impoverished idiom that sets itself apart from other forms of language, such as that of plants. For the poet, imagination breaks the strictures of human signification and opens up the space for a phytophilic writing, one that has heard and incorporated the pre-subjective language of trees and turned it into verse. As Barros puts it: “[t]o speak from nobody’s vantage point creates communion with trees”¹¹

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9. As plantas
me ensinavam de chão.
Fui aprendendo com o corpo. (123)
 10. Eu queria fazer parte das árvores como os
pássaros fazem.
Eu queria fazer parte do orvalho como as
pedras fazem.
Eu só não queria significar.
Porque significar limita a imaginação.
E com pouca imaginação eu não poderia
fazer parte de uma árvore
 11. [f]alar a partir de ninguém faz comunhão com as árvores

(392). This depersonalized speech would be a “thing-like, larval, stonish dialect/A dawning, Adamic language would be born,/Edenic, inaugural-/ That poets would learn”¹² (274). Barros’s plant-modulated language is the result of a linguistic “phenomenological reduction” that harks back to a period when humans, trees, and other beings were not yet differentiated, discrete entities.

To write is, then, for Barros, to “learn/the language of trees”¹³ (490) that will express the true “Matter of Poetry,” the title of a poem where we find one of the author’s most comprehensive poetics. Here, he lists the various subject matters that make their way into his verse:

Things that are not pretentious, like
for example: rocks that smell
water, men
going through periods of tree,
lend themselves to poetry.¹⁴
(154)

These lines encapsulate not only the convergence of plant- and human thought and language but also a unity of various entities, which is another hallmark of Barros’s writing. The fluidity of being, abolishing fixed essences, allows for rocks to “smell / water” and men to go “through periods of tree.” In another poem, Barros writes: “I think of the exchange of favors that is established; of the mutuality; of the support that species give each other”¹⁵ (211). This solidarity risks becoming just another version of the “old quasi-animism”¹⁶ that anthropomorphizes non-humans attributing to them human traits, as the author recognizes (217). However, if Barros is guilty of anthropomorphism, he does not take humans as a yardstick in the species exchanges he depicts: “trees, animals and people have an overtly equal nature”¹⁷ (217) that is revealed through poetry. The

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12. um dialeto coisal, larval, pedral, etc./Nasceria uma linguagem madruguenta, adâmica,/edênica, inaugural -/Que os poetas aprenderiam
13. aprender/ o idioma das árvores
14. As coisas que não pretendem, como
por exemplo: pedras que cheiram
água, homens
que atravessam períodos de árvore,
se prestam para a poesia.
15. Penso na troca de favores que se estabelece; no mutualismo; no amparo que as espécies se dão.
16. velho quase-animismo
17. árvores, bichos e pessoas têm natureza assumida igual

collaboration between species is not an extension of human conduct to the behavior of animals and plants but rather an unavoidable consequence of their interdependence. Barros's poetry documents a phytophilic's process of discovering the scope of these connections in his desire to become more like a plant.

In addition to radically transforming philosophical and poetical languages, phytophilia triggers their mutual approximation on the emerging terrain of postmetaphysical existence. The old quarrel between philosophers and poets, emphatically expressed in Plato's dialogues, finds a provisional respite in the attraction of both groups to vegetal life. The writings of Rousseau and Barros offer us, as we hope to have demonstrated, possible paths towards the articulation of wisdom and creative practice, *sophia* and *poiesis*, both with one another and with their beloved plants.

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