



GRAFTS
writings
on plants

M i c h a e l M a r d e r

U N I V O C A L

21. Thoreau's beans (and weeds)

The problem of sovereignty, though usually not discussed with regard to the vegetal world, is crisply outlined in a quandary that, time and again, crops up after my lectures. The gist of it is the following: “If I am to treat plants ethically, then how am I to decide which ones deserve to grow? What gives me the right to destroy some of them as weeds, while nourishing and nurturing others? In short, if I subscribe to your philosophy, should I just sit back, watch my garden overgrow with grass, and give up on gardening as a violent activity, disrespectful towards plants?”

In *Walden*, Henry D. Thoreau faced a similar dilemma. Experimenting with self-sufficient living, he cultivated a small bean-field close to the hut he had built in the woods: “That was my curious labor all summer—to make this portion of the earth’s surface, which had yielded only cinquefoil, blackberries, johnswort, and the like [...] produce instead this pulse. [...] But what right had I to oust johnswort and the rest, and break up their ancient herb garden?”⁴⁰ If, in its traditional formulation, the prerogative of sovereignty was to “make live or let die,” in its vegetal reformulation by Thoreau, it has to do with making grow or letting wither. The unarticulated basis for sundry decisions passed on plants is utility: Which species would be more advantageous for yielding food, construction materials, clothing, and the like? Whatever is deemed useless is condemned to be deracinated as a weed; whatever may serve our purposes is allowed to continue growing and even to expand.

To these taken-for-granted reasons, Thoreau opposes the natural history of a place, the plants’ own “ancient herb garden,” or what we would now call an “ecosystem.” He does not fetishize wilderness, but implies that giving any “portion of the earth’s surface” its due means, in the Leibnizian spirit,

40. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, edited by Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 168-9.

respecting its self-expression, including in the vegetation that proliferates there. From the standpoint of the place itself, the weeds are the humans as well as the monocultures our species spreads wherever it finds itself or the animals it breeds and/or exterminates. Exactly one century after Thoreau's *Walden*, Aldo Leopold will encapsulate this insight in the thesis of "thinking like a mountain."

Let sovereignty remain grounded in utility, but also let the forgotten questions *useful for whom? useful for what?* be raised. On the one hand, the weed is a plant that impedes the realization of human goals. On the other hand, and more broadly, it may be a plant that prevents the thriving of an entire ecosystem. So, if usefulness for life's flourishing, in all its diverse manifestations, were the criterion for declaring something a weed, then wouldn't vast sugarcane and cornfields as well as eucalyptus groves be included in this category? After all, the sprawling sugarcane, corn, and eucalyptus plantations reduce biodiversity, cause soil to erode and deplete the nutrients and minerals it contains.

Thoreau has an inkling about the relative nature of the word *weed*, which he upends in his self-reflexive agricultural practice: "Removing the weeds, putting fresh soil about the bean stems, and encouraging this weed which I had sown, making the yellow soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass—this was my daily work."⁴¹ Here is a beautiful manifesto of plant-thinking, if there ever was one: leaves and blossoms are the yellow soil's expressions of "its summer thought," concretized in beans with Thoreau's assistance. Yet, we cannot help but notice a stark contrast between his interference, or his mediation between the earth and the plant, described in terms of encouragement ("and encouraging this weed which I had sown") and in terms of an imposition ("making the yellow soil express its summer thought"). That is where push comes to shove: Does Thoreau exercise sovereignty over the crops

41. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 170.

and the soil he cultivates or does he facilitate their mutual expression? Is labeling his choice of plant *weed* sufficient for counterbalancing the adverse effects of his willful decision?

We must shake off the erroneous impression that we are faced with only two options, the *either/or* of absolute control and complete passivity. Inaction and mere receptivity are the harbingers of nihilism, caught up in a deadly spiral with its opposite, namely the sovereign dream of ceaseless potency and activity. To avoid choosing is not to act ethically; it is to evade responsibility and to assume an ostensibly neutral posture, as disrespectful toward the beings that deserve our attention as the promotion of their ruthless exploitation. We cannot be ourselves *either* if we totally submit to whatever happens *or* if we are (or think we are) in total control of the situation, wherein we play the determining role. Revisiting the worry that an ethical philosophy of plants would yield overgrown gardens, it becomes clear that a certain measure of selectivity, narrowing down the possibilities of what would take root and continue growing, is not disastrous; it is an element of our entanglement with plants.

I find the suggestion that any active engagement with other living beings—whether vegetal, animal or human—partakes of sovereignty and violence to be grotesque, an exaggeration of valid concerns with the overreach of our desire for domination. Such an exaggeration does not promote but in fact harms its cause. In short, the disengagement it endorses risks flipping into nonchalant abandon, where the stance of letting-be might quickly deteriorate into that of letting-die or letting-wither. It might, in other words, continue wielding sovereignty by other, clandestine means.

As an alternative, care involves solicitude, attention to the cared for, singling out and respecting their singularity, while contemplating and setting in their context (some would say *relativizing*) the motivations behind such attention. A caring approach is, furthermore, interactive, to the extent that it includes a willingness to be cared by what or who you care

for. We would be deluded if we were to think that gardening or farming is a unilateral relation; the plants and the earth respond and change their self-expression depending on my actions. Again, Thoreau is at the forefront of vegetal interactivity. “What shall I learn of beans or beans of me?”⁴² he asks, teaching us an invaluable lesson in plant-thinking.

42. Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 168.