

The Understated Radical:

THE SUBVERSIVE THEMES OF *THE BOTANY OF DESIRE*

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The Botany of Desire by Michael Pollan is ostensibly about the co-evolutionary paths of humans and plants: an exploration of intertwining desires favoring the point of view of the plant. But there are other themes that run beneath the surface of this narrative: deeper, more subversive themes—themes such as paganism, ideology, and social theory. These are the themes that tie the book together, despite the superficial focus on four plants—apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes—and four related human desires—sweetness, beauty, intoxication, and control.

Although Pollan links apples to the human desire for sweetness, one of the main points of this chapter is that this desire has not always reined: apples, typically bitter, were historically used to primarily to ferment into alcohol. But as the culture changed—and with it the culture's desires—so did the apple, becoming sweet when being bitter was no longer preferred. But because of the apple's genetic characteristics—each seed is completely different from all others—apples are nearly impossible to breed in the traditional sense: the progeny of a Red Delicious tree, for example are likely to be anything but red and delicious. Apples suitable for eating—that is to say, sweet—tend to be extremely rare, and when discovered the only way to retain the apple is to clone it. Though a fascinating account, it is difficult to see how this example supports Pollan's thesis of co-evolution: it illustrates the impact of human desire on apples but fails to show how the reverse might be true. Certainly the apple is better off for its bargain and has managed to secure a meteoric rise without

much genetic change; but its fate has still been dictated by the whim and fancy of humans.

The chapter also introduces another continuing theme of the book: the Apollonian / Dionysian dichotomy—the conflict of wildness and culture, or man and nature. John Chapman (AKA Johnny Appleseed) is depicted as a Dionysian figure, straddling the lines between “wilderness and civilization, man and woman, man and god, beast and man” (Pollan, 37). Domestication, to Pollan, is a dance between these two realms and necessitating both. Even the cultivators of genetically identical Red Delicious apples owe their livelihood to the wild, uncontrolled variation dormant within the seed of every fruit. The seemingly superficial desire for sweetness is given near-spiritual significance—a sublimity connected to Dionysian ideas of wilderness.

Tulips provide a forum for discussing one of the missing pieces of Pollan's thesis—namely, that plants manipulate humans. Via a brief history of life on earth, Pollan postulates that flowering plants provided the food necessary for mammals to survive, and therefore, in a very literal sense, humans would not exist but for flowers. It would seem that humans and flowers “grew up together” and formed what Pollan calls a “grand evolutionary contract: nutrition in exchange for transportation” (Pollan, 108). It is here that the wall between natural and artificial selection begins to crack: from the plant's point of view they are fundamentally the same. It matters little whether a bee or a human does the selecting; in either case, the animal is merely picking out preferred natural variations, and in neither case are these variations created by the animal. In a strikingly

Dawkins-esque fashion, Pollan redefines animals from the plant's point of view as vehicles for the propagation of flowers.

The central desire that drives humans' selection of flowers is *beauty*—the desire around which the chapter is structured. Quietly slipped within the discussion of the various components of beauty—which include the classic elements of contrast, form, and variation—appear Apollo and Dionysus. But this time the gods are working together, sabotaging the oppositions established in the first chapter. Beauty, according to Pollan, requires *both* Apollonian orderliness and Dionysian unexpectedness. It is a complex idea, a mixture of seemingly antagonistic elements, occurring when “our dreams of order and abandon come together” (Pollan, 106). Pollan continues: “One tendency uninformed by the other can bring forth only coldness or chaos” (106). It is in that gray area between two extremes where beauty—and so much else—lies.

Pollan's treatment of marijuana is, in one sense, a call for reconciliation. The cannabis plant has followed two distinct paths, related to two distinct human inclinations: one path (following Apollo) has yielded productive fiber; the other (following Dionysus) has produced psychoactive compounds specially tailored to stimulate the human brain. His view seems to be that both are valuable, and that we have perhaps put too much faith in rationality and the specter of control.

The ideas of “natural” and “artificial” also resurface here. It seems that the human brain contains receptors for “cannabinoids” or cannabis-like compounds—that is to say, they are a “natural” part of the human system. This system is linked to pain management, memory formation, appetite, movement, and emotion—the systems typically affected by marijuana. People can “naturally” drug themselves by manipulating this system through meditation, fasting, or prayer—or through drugs like marijuana. This begs the question: why is one form reprehensible when the others are not? Why is meditation “natural” but drugs are “artificial” when they do fundamentally the same thing? Pollan's answers are unsettling at

best: everything from offending the Protestant—that is to say *capitalist*—work ethic, to undermining the Judeo-Christian spirit/body dualism.

It is here for the first time that Pollan deals directly with paganism, and he pits it confrontationally against Judeo-Christian monotheism. The former finds spiritual significance in nature; the latter denies it. The former promises fulfillment and pleasure from the senses and in the present; the latter flatly condemns such behavior. The former subverts the “metaphysics of desire” that underlie our capitalist system—that is, working to obtain gratification—; the latter supports it. It is a conflict of worldviews, and through this lens everything begins to look a little different. What are the real reasons that pharmaceutical corporations want to extract the medicinal qualities of marijuana? Is it for simple health reasons, or is it because an extract can be prescribed, patented, and regulated?—neatly brought under the umbrella of economics where it can be traded as a commodity like any other, simultaneously removing the threats of free pleasure, the natural world, and all traces of pagan spirituality?

Pollan's writing is reminiscent of the social critic Philip Slater, who wrote in 1970 about the connection between economics and scarcity: “The core of the old culture is scarcity. Everything rests upon the assumption that the world does not contain the wherewithal to satisfy the needs of its human inhabitants. From this it follows that people must compete with one another for these scarce resources” (103). Without scarcity there is no competition, and without competition there is no capitalism. Pollan makes such correlations glancingly, almost playfully—perhaps a defensive reaction, a way of raising decidedly subversive ideas in as near a non-threatening way as possible.

The potato plant provides one of the best forums for subversive themes as it is paired with the human desire for *control*—one of the book's most political desires, especially when linked with genetic engineering. Once again, we are confronted with the line between natural and artificial, but here Pollan draws lines rather

than erasing them. Even so, his distinction is real and common-sense: the fact that genetic engineering introduces variation that never resided within the plant itself. Biotechnology represents a reversal of the co-evolutionary dance because it does not rely on *selection*; rather, on the forcible creation of traits: a decidedly one-way operation.

Yet this control comes to seem spurious—or at least severely limited. The problems with control often deal with the very homogeneity that it is aimed at cultivating. Even the advanced control represented by genetic engineering—a one-way relationship that at first seems to subvert the old rules of co-evolution—falls victim to these problems. Homogeneity is unstable: a code easily “cracked” by genetic trial and error. Ireland’s potato famine provides a dramatic example of this—a problem caused not so much by the potato as the potato monoculture (Pollan, 230)—but one need look no further than insects’ resistance to pesticides. Even Monsanto’s white-robed lab workers rely on nature’s genetic diversity to operate (relying on Dionysus again?); and so humans still fall under the domain of nature’s laws. But the conflict remains: “the logic of nature collides with the logic of economies; which logic will ultimately prevail can never be in doubt” (Pollan, 231).

The logic of economies is once again brought front and center, this time via a discussion of intellectual property rights. Intellectual property is juxtaposed with common heritage; commoditization with natural abundance; scarcity with plenty. “The ancient logic of the seed,” writes Pollan, “has yielded to the modern logic of capitalism” (232). But this economic logic is not entirely forced: it is cultural, borne of human desire—the desire, for example, for the same perfect French Fry in any McDonald’s in the world. Control is necessitated by industrialized processes, which are ostensibly fueled by consumer choices. It is the consumer who has ultimately voted Dionysus out of office and instated the perhaps too-rigid control of Apollo.

In his review of Pollan’s book, New York Times writer Burkhard Bilger expresses

frustration at the “redundancies” of the text (Bilger)—especially the author’s insistence on returning to the imagery of Apollo and Dionysus, which really have little to do with the thesis of co-evolution. This insistence makes sense, however, if the book is considered in a different light. Another reviewer points out that Pollan is “anxious to return human beings to the circle of nature ... and the invocation of the Greek god is a clever way to navigate that idea” (Grybowski).

This, in fact, is the crucial subtext to the entire book: the deconstruction of the Western man/nature duality in favor of a more holistic—one might even say *pagan*—worldview. It was no accident that Greek gods should surface so often: it was, as John Torrence writes, “one of the strengths of the pagan Greek view of humans that there as no question of human beings *not* being part of nature” (11). Pollan’s holistic worldview is so insidious that one could call it the real thesis of the book. The argument takes two forms: first, a deconstruction of the duality itself, and second, the construction of the framework of a more unified philosophy.

The man/nature duality—illustrated vividly by our language: we divide the world into subjects which act upon objects, and humans are generally the subjects—is challenged in a number of ways. The most obvious is the book’s the discussion of mutual dependency and symbiosis: that human history has been shaped by the genetic possibilities inherent in plants. Domestication, Pollan reminds us, takes two players, and both necessarily benefit from playing the game. And in this game, humans are subject to the same rules as bees: nutrition in exchange for transport. The effect is not only humbling, but leveling: when humans are on the same playing field and bees and plants, the human/nature distinction becomes tenuous at best.

The duality is also challenged by denying the subject/object distinction: by subverting the lines between controlling and controlled. As discussed above, human control is shown to be temporary and delivered at a high cost. Monocultures “will always be exquisitely vulnerable to insects, weeds, and

disease—to all the vicissitudes of nature” (Pollan, 225). And the solutions that are proposed to alleviate these problems—whether pesticides or genetic engineering—are quickly undermined by nature: pests become resistant. What results is a perpetual race between natural adaptation and human ingenuity: new technologies must be developed faster than natural resistance in a sort of modern-day version of the myth of Sisyphus. The story of human control collides with the realities of nature, and to Pollan it is clear “which logic will prevail” (231). Control is ultimately untenable; and therefore so is the distinction between the controlling and the controlled.

In place of the traditional man/nature duality, Pollan offers the logic of the pagan Greek worldview. The favorite duo of Apollo and Dionysus provide a forum for discussing the linkages between reason and emotion, and between wilderness and civilization. The Greeks brought these oppositions together rather than separating them—and so should we, Pollan carefully refrains from stating. He makes a case that both are required to create beauty (as with the tulip), to create stability (as with the potato), and to live in the moment (as with marijuana). The privileging of one over the other leads to either “coldness or chaos” (Pollan, 106). The case for coldness is easy to see: genetic engineering, intellectual property, and even the lack of variation among apples are all manifestations of an extreme Apollonian tendency. These things must be balanced by mystery and sensuality—not only out of practicality (that would be far too Apollonian!)—but also because of the very nature of human desire.

If one defines paganism as finding spiritual significance in nature, then Pollan makes a strong case for paganism. Psychoactive plants are connected with spiritual experiences. Beauty, awe, and sweetness are sensations with material origins. And all of the lines that we have drawn in the sand separating man from that other, nature, are quietly erased by the rising tide of Pollan’s prose. By deconstructing the boundaries between matter and spirit, Pollan is also deconstructing one of the primary

pillars of the man/nature dichotomy. If humans are made from the same stuff as the rest of the world, and our consciousness is not a result of a unique other-worldly force, then our distinctions become distinctions of *degrees* and not of *type*—that is to say, we still vary from the rest of the world but not so much as to justify a different classification. This is a philosophy of monism rather than dualism: the dichotomy has been effectively—if covertly—deconstructed, and humans are returned to the realm of “nature.”

This review might be more controversial than *The Botany of Desire* itself, but if so, it is due to the presentation rather than the content. The themes that connected Pollan’s writing *are* controversial, but they are cleverly hidden from view and rarely stated explicitly. Topics such as ideology and values are ultimately too subversive to form the thesis of a popular work; and besides, they are arguably too confrontational for Pollan’s musing, wandering style. It is more persuasive—and more Dionysian—to take the less direct route: to mull over those interesting inconsistencies in Western thought through the relatively innocuous tales of a fruit, a flower, a weed, and a spud.

References

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