

“Everything is Leaf...”

By Lisa Robertson

Like Rousseau, Goethe botanized.

At the 2013 De l'Allemagne show at the Louvre, pages from Goethe's 1790 herbarium were exhibited alongside Paul Klee's, from 1924. Nearby were his ink-wash sketches of clouds; a series of small watercolour studies for *Theory of Colours*; and a five-foot-diameter octagonal piece called “Grand écran de la théorie des couleurs” constructed of colored paper squares pasted over canvas, in 1791-92. I was attracted to the vulnerability of the 225 year-old dry, pressed plant material pasted down with little blue paper strips in the herbarium. It made me think of the pressed and delicately mended sea-foam embroidered silk 1930's lingerie once belonging to my grandmother, sent to me in the mail by my mother that year. I should make of it an herbarium page.

The museum wall-text reminded viewers that it was Goethe who coined the word ‘morphology’; he was also responsible for bringing the word ‘metamorphosis’ forward from the classical literary and mythological canon, into the contemporary discourse of the biological sciences. He defined morphology as a dynamic formal process inherent to organisms. The form of a plant was a changing unit; morphology studied that form as it changed. “Everything is leaf” he wrote in 1787, in a letter to Charlotte von Stein, but for Goethe a leaf was not an *actual* unit, but an idea realized by diverse manifestations: seed cotyledon, foliage and floral organs are all different forms of the ‘leaf’ idea. In 1786, he had written to von Stein “It is a becoming aware of the form. . . with which nature is always only playing, as it were, and in playing, brings forth its manifold life.”

Form is game, vitality, love, and part of a thinking about language, which Goethe did too, in a 1815 manuscript poem called Ginkgo Biloba—three four-line stanzas above a pasted-on pair of double-lobed ginkgo leaves. Translated to English, the second and third stanzas read:

Is it a living being,
Which has separated in itself?
Or are these two, who chose
To be recognized as one?

Answering this kind of question,
Haven't I found the proper meaning,
Don't you feel in my songs,
That I'm one and double?¹

When I was looking at Goethe's handwritten poem in the display case at the Louvre, I overheard the man next to me knowledgeably telling his companion that it was a poem about the lungs. Not able to read German, I immediately accepted the stranger's interpretation. Leaf and lung seemed similar enough. Having later found a translation, I learned that he couldn't read German either. But his explanation doesn't feel wrong. He was reading the ginkgo.

¹ anonymous translation by wikipedia contributor

In a public conversation with the poet Trish Salah in Toronto several years ago,² I was too hasty to oppose politics to aesthetics, and Trish reminded me that aesthetics is desire. Her inference was that where there is desire, there is politics, and I've been thinking about this ever since. It's not the unit, not the substantive iteration, that makes form potent, but the manifold variation in response to desire or need. We could say that history's formal relationship to the present is morphological. The poem is one place where we can observe this dynamic; politics is another.

I'd like to give this ginkgo biloba back to Trish now, this little sprig, this lung-camisole.³

² We were participating in Margaret Christakos' Influenza Salon.

³ An earlier version of "Everything is Leaf" was originally published on April 29th, 2013
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2013/04/everything-is-leaf->