

## Giving Things Their Proper Names: Carl Linnaeus and W. H. Auden



*nomina si pereunt, perit et cognitio rerum*  
[Without names, our knowledge of things would perish] (1)  
Carl Linnaeus

*Proper names are poetry in the raw. Like all poetry they are untranslatable* (2).  
W. H. Auden

This year we celebrate the 300th anniversary of Carl (Carolus) Linnaeus (1707–1778) whose binomial system has made it unlikely that the names of living things will perish. We also celebrate the 100th anniversary of Wystan Hugh Auden (1907–1973) who gave his time the proper name: The Age of Anxiety (3).

An avatar of the 18th century Enlightenment, Linnaeus set the stage for Darwin by recognizing similarities between man and ape: he named our species *Homo sapiens*. In an age when the word was unspoken, Linnaeus recognized that even plants had sex. He put Sweden on the map of natural science and changed forever the way we label living things.

An avatar of the Enlightened Left in the 20th century, Auden brought English poetry into the modern world: he set planes and trains and automobiles to verse. At a time when “In the nightmare of

the dark /All the dogs of Europe bark,” while Yeats was chasing the Celtic occult, and T. S. Eliot worried over “Murder in the Cathedral,” Auden addressed Murder in Madrid. And after Guernica and the Hitler war, he retained high hope for a new world of reason, paying our profession a compliment we barely deserve:

*The true men of action in our time, those who transform the world, are not the politicians and the statesmen, but the scientists. When I find myself in the company of scientists, I feel like a shabby curate who has strayed by mistake into a drawing room full of dukes* (4).

### LINNAEUS, KING OF FLOWERS

The images of Linnaeus and Auden show them in the process of forging the temper of their time. Both were prodigies: Linnaeus proclaimed not immodestly

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Images: Left: Carl Linnaeus. Engraving by August Ehrensvärd (1740). Image courtesy of Linnaeus 2007. Right: W. H. Auden with Erika Mann (1935). Image courtesy of A. D. Bangham.©

“Before the age of 23, I had thought out everything (5).” He may have been right. By 1740, “Carolus Linnaeus, Med. Doc.” had become the founder and first president of the Royal Swedish Academy of Science and was also practicing medicine in Stockholm. After seven years of medical study and botanical research in Lund and Uppsala, Linnaeus earned his M.D. from the University of Harderwijk, a Dutch diploma mill that exists no longer. In the same year he gained international attention for his *Systema Natura* (1735). Linnaeus’ first effort at botanical nomenclature at age 22 had been “Præluia sponsaliorum plantarum” [A Prelude to the Wedding of Plants], based in good part on his 2300 mile collecting trip through Lapland to the Arctic Ocean. The *Systema Natura* went further into the maze of gender. He divided plants into classes by the number of “male genitals,” the stamens, and then into orders by their pistils, the female “genitals.” The supporting structure, the calyx, became the “nuptial bed.” His sexual taxonomy may have gone a tad overboard, with some structures compared to labia minora and majora, and an entire class of flowers named Clitoria (6–10).

Whatever the sexual overtones, Linnaean botany was not only proved correct but heuristic, based as it was on specimens collected worldwide. In Sweden, Linnaeus had gathered plants from Lapland to the Baltic; in Leiden he consulted Boerhaave and gained access to Clifford’s collections of the Dutch East India Company; in Amsterdam he drew Seba’s marine flora; at Oxford he scoured Sherard’s global Botanical Garden; in Paris, he picked through the Jardin des Plantes with Jussieu. His botanical skills earned him a corresponding membership in the French Academy.

A year after Ehrenswärd engraved his portrait, Linnaeus was appointed Professor of Medicine in Uppsala (1741), and for the next three decades he and his students worked out the problem of assigning finite names to the infinite objects of nature. Key to the enterprise was a system of names. In *Philosophia Botanica* (1750) Linnaeus announced binomial taxonomy, “A plant is completely named, if it is provided with a generic name and a specific one,” adding that the characteristics of a species are dictated by its genus (6). Additions and corrections to the Linnaean *Systema Natura* followed apace: the first edition of 1735 was only 12 pages long, but by the twelfth edition of 1768 it had grown to 2300 pages and encompassed some 15,000 species. Nor was medicine given short shrift: Linnaeus first classified fevers (and hinted at contagion) in “Exanthemata viva” (1757). Later, he extended his system to all of human disease in the *Genera Morborum* (1763). But botanical science and its application remained his first love. Dubbed the “King of Flowers” in Sweden (5), Linnaeus made certain that if the treatment of a disease was herbal, the name of the herb was binomial.

## LINNAEUS AND THE DARWINS

Linnaeus and binomial botany spread rapidly across Europe. In England, his first translator was Erasmus Darwin, F.R.S., Charles Darwin’s grandfather. A beacon of the English Enlightenment, Erasmus Darwin was a prodigious physician, naturalist, and anti-slavery advocate. He was also a man of mirth and spirit who appreciated Linnaeus’ erotic description of plants. Linnaeus had compared flowers with nine stamens and one pistil to “nine men in the same bride’s chamber, with one woman (10).” Following suit, Erasmus used Linnaeus’s polygamous imagery for his own purposes in *The Botanic Garden* (1791):

*Sweet blooms GENISTA in the myrtle shade  
And ten fond brothers woo the haughty maid  
Two knights before the fragrant altar bend  
Adored MELISSA. . . (11)*

Charles Darwin was familiar with Linnaeus not only from his grandfather’s couplets, but also from his own botanical studies. Half a century after *The Botanic Garden*, Charles Darwin paid homage to the King of Flowers in *On the Origin of Species* (1859):

*Expressions such as the famous one by Linnaeus. . . that the characters do not make the genus but that the genus gives the characters, seem to imply that some deeper bond is included in our classification than mere resemblance. I believe that this is the case and that community of descent is the bond (12).*

Community of human descent followed directly from Linnaean nomenclature. Linnaeus decreed that man is an Animal (kingdom), a Mammal (class), a Primate (order), and it follows, therefore, that *Homo sapiens* (genus and species) is subtended by the order of Primates. A bond, deeper than mere resemblance, would dictate that *Homo sapiens* shares Darwinian “community of descent” with apes.

Recent scholarship has shown that the decision to classify man with apes was taken jointly by Linnaeus and a fellow Uppsalian naturalist, Peter Artedi, when both worked in Amsterdam in 1735. Ironically, Artedi (now known as the King of Ichthyology) was drowned in an Amsterdam canal in the early hours of September 28th, 1735, after an evening’s bout of drinking with his patron, Albertus Seba. Linnaeus published Artedi’s works, manuscripts, and biography, fulfilling a pact that if one should die, then “the other would regard it as a sacred duty to give to the world what observations might be left. . . (9)”

Erasmus Darwin picked up on the Artedi/Linnaean notion of human origins in his “Zoonomia” and “The Temple of Nature” only to be mocked by Coleridge for suggesting that man had “descended from some lucky species of Ape or Baboon (13).” It seems fitting, therefore, that Dr. Darwin’s grandson put evolution into play once and for all. The Darwin-Wallace paper (1858) that first proposed the theory of evolution



went back to teach classes and on the next day Erika Mann returned to Switzerland with a British passport. She telegraphed Auden almost immediately: MEINE LIEBE, DEINE LIEBE, ALLE MENSCHEN SIND GLEICH [my love, your love, all men are equal] (17). It's a banner worth raising against homophobes today.

Term over, Auden left the Down School forever and embarked on a soon to be well-documented voyage to and around Iceland with Louis MacNeice (18). That trip to the mythic North of his father's dreams confirmed Auden's notion that, somewhere in this world, on some island, *Alle Menschen Sind Gleich*:

*Fortunate Island*  
*Where all men are equal*  
*But not vulgar—not yet* (19).

The marriage of W. H. Auden, arguably the best poet in English of the twentieth century, to Erika Mann daughter of Thomas Mann, clearly the best German novelist of the century, is the stuff of history, raw. But a darker tone is struck by another name on the register, Gustav Grundgens, Erika Mann's first husband. Grundgens, an actor and director, was a willing player in the Nazi game of rank and honor. Greatly favored by both Göbbels and Göring, he became celebrated for his portrayal of Faust, or Mephisto, a role he repeated with plaudits to Nazi-packed houses in Munich and Berlin. He rose to direct Berlin's official Staatstheater during the war and produced popular fare for the Nazi state: one imagines a chorus of brown-shirts yodeling "The Hills are alive with the sound of Hitler. . ." Always the survivor, Grundgens emerged from the fall of the Reich in a Faustian transformation, a rehabilitated, honored German hero of "Kunst (20)."

Erika took another path. She became a journalist, wrote several books with brother Klaus exposing pre-war fascism, reported on the Spanish Civil War, and then wrote courtroom dispatches from the Nuremberg trials, while Grundgens was vamping the Munich stage, others had been busy in the Munich suburb of Dachau. Professors Pfannensteil of Marburg, Jarisch of Innsbruck, and Linger of Munich froze scores of inmates to death and reported detailed autopsies to "proper" scientific congresses. In Dachau also, Professor Beiglbock of Berlin forced Poles and Jews to drink gallons of seawater: descriptions of the victims' hallucinations and heart failures were neatly recorded in what passed for scientific manuscripts. At the Natzweiler camp, Professor Dr. Eugen Haagen—formerly of the Rockefeller Institute—worked to transmit viral hepatitis from prisoner to prisoner and managed successfully to kill several hundreds with experimental typhus (21). Pfannensteil, Jarisch, Linger, Beiglbock and Haagen—the proper names recorded by the Nuremberg tribunals are raw poetry, indeed: *fleurs du mal*.

## AUDEN AND THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

The Mann-Auden marriage was a noble gesture on behalf of an exile in an era when:

*Exiled Thucydides knew*  
*All that a speech can say*  
*About Democracy,*  
*And what dictators do,*  
*The elderly rubbish they talk*  
*To an apathetic grave;*  
*Analysed all in his book*  
*The enlightenment driven away* (22).

Auden and his fellow anti-Fascists of the thirties were convinced that the journals of science contained clues to the equality of man. Auden believed that the laws of physics govern servant and master alike, and that it was the job of the poet to instruct both in the language of their common history, "Without science, we should have no notion of equality: without art no notion of liberty (4)."

Auden himself was persuaded that science, like poetry, is a "gratuitous, not a utile, act, something one does not because one must, but because it is fun." Oliver Sacks who was a friend explained that "He had the analytic brilliance and vigour of a physical scientist; he had an intuitive penetrating, almost clairvoyant sense of what was going on in people, physically and spiritually, what was amiss and what was aright (23)." His oldest friends, Isherwood and Cyril Connolly, have called him a schoolboy scientist at heart; Stephen Spender acclaimed him as the diagnostician of our fears. Auden was ashamed by the extent to which the children of art and science enlisted in the service of injustice and moral squalor. Commissioned as a Major at the close of the Second World War, he visited Dachau and Natzweiler where the methods of science were mocked on behalf of

*The grand apocalyptic dream*  
*In which the persecutors scream*  
*As on the evil Aryan lives*  
*Descends the night of the long knives* (22)

Examples of scientific disgrace were paralleled in the realm of the arts not only by the Grundgens of the stage, but also the complicities of Heidegger, the Wagnerians of Bayreuth and Oberammergau, and the films of Leni Riefenstahl. Auden was persuaded that our best chance lay in establishing limits to the collaboration between intellect and tyranny. He spelled out his hopes in his "Ode to Terminus," the Roman God of Limits:

*In this world our colossal immodesty*  
*has plundered and poisoned it is possible*  
*You still might save us, who by now have*  
*learned this: that scientists, to be lucky,*  
*must remind us to take all they say as a*  
*tall story. . .* (24)

There's another strain here: a restatement of "Without science, no equality." Auden is speaking to us from the experience of a generation which had relied on experimental science and its diversities as a shield against the biological hierarchies of fascism.

How could the brightest of Europe have been deluded into surrendering equality for the grand apocalyptic dreams of one ideology or another? In “Ode to Terminus” (24) he appealed to us to give things their proper names:

. . . *This, whatever micro-biology may think, is the world we really live in and that saves our sanity, who know all too well how the most erudite mind behaves in the dark without a surround it is called on to interpret, how, discarding rhythm, punctuation, metaphor, it sinks into a driveling monologue, too literal to see a joke or distinguish a penis from a pencil.*

One is sure that Linnaeus would have appreciated Auden’s taxonomy: the last two objects are members, literally, of two different kingdoms.

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