



The Poetics of
NATURAL HISTORY

From John Bartram to William James



CHRISTOPH IRMSCHER

Rutgers University Press
New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London

INTRODUCTION

It was on a hot Thursday in July of 1787 that the Reverend Dr. Manasseh Cutler arrived in Philadelphia, his pockets stuffed with letters of introduction to people of rank and influence. Dr. Cutler, a Yale-educated clergyman and former chaplain in the Eleventh Massachusetts Regiment, was here on important business. In May 1787, the Constitutional Convention had first met in Philadelphia, and now debates raged about the future of the American experiment. Dr. Cutler had come to rake the coals. As the newly appointed agent for the "Ohio Company," an association of Revolutionary War veterans who desired territorial compensation for the blood they had shed for America, he wanted to "secure both law and land" from the politicians in Philadelphia and New York. Specifically, he was interested in the acquisition of a tract at the junction of the Ohio and Muskingum rivers (*LJC* 1: 121).

Busy as he was, Cutler had precious little time to spare during his visit; he feared that he would not even be able to deliver his letters to all the appropriate people (*LJC* 1: 254). But the good reverend was a man of many talents: besides being a cunning land speculator, he had distinguished himself as a physician, astronomer, and botanist. Wherever he went, his "entire botanizing apparatus" traveled with him. Small wonder that, on the first full day of his visit, he took time out to inspect Philadelphia's new museum, Charles Willson Peale's "collection of paintings and natural curiosities" (*LJC* 1: 259).

When Cutler and his friend Dr. Clarkson arrived at Peale's museum, the collector himself was nowhere to be seen. A boy pointed them to the gallery "where the curiosities were" and promised that Peale would be with them shortly. Entering a long, narrow hallway, Cutler cautiously peered into the gallery and, through a little glass window, saw "a gentleman close to me, standing with a pencil in one hand, and a small sheet of ivory in the other, and his eyes directed to the opposite side of the room, as though he was taking some object on his ivory sheet" (*LJC* 1: 259). This had to be the proud collector himself, standing amidst his prize possessions, making a sketch of a particularly interesting exhibit. Clarkson, who knew Peale personally, suggested to Cutler that they had better wait outside: "Mr. Peale is very busy. . . . We will step back into the other room and wait till he is at leisure" (*LJC* 1: 259). Turning their backs to where they had just seen Peale at work, the men walked back to the other room. But there, to their amazement, they saw none

other than Peale himself, hastening toward them from exactly the opposite direction. Mystified, Clarkson exclaimed:

"Mr. Peale, how is it possible you should get out of the other room to meet us here?" Mr. Peale smiled. "I have not been in the other room," says he, "for some time." "No!" says Clarkson, "Did I not see you there this moment, with your pencil and ivory?" "Why, do you think you did?" says Peale. "Do I think I did? Yes," says the Doctor. "I saw you there if I ever saw you in my life." "Well," says Peale, "let us go and see."

Back in the gallery, they found "the man standing as before." Now Cutler was impressed, too. Looking back and forth between Peale and the figure with the ivory sheet and pencil, he "beheld two men, so perfectly alike that I could not discern the minutest difference. One of them, indeed, had no motion; but he appeared to me as *absolutely* alive as the other, and I could hardly help wondering that he did not smile or take a part in the conversation" (*LJC* 1: 260).

What Cutler and Clarkson had seen in the gallery was nothing other than a full-sized wax replica of Peale himself, his self-portrait, put on display alongside his numerous other exhibits: portraits of famous people (excellent likenesses, Cutler thought); a collection of stuffed ducks, geese, cranes, and herons floating on an artificial pond ("all having the appearance of life" and "admirably preserved"); songbirds "of almost every species in America" perching on trees; enormous rattlesnakes hiding behind rocks; a gallery of wild animals ("bear, deer, leopard, tiger, wild-cat, fox, raccoon, rabbit, squirrel, etc."). To Cutler, Mr. Peale suddenly seemed like a kind of latter-day Noah, except that not "even Noah could have boasted of a better collection" (*LJC* 1: 262). But by far the most remarkable exhibit in Peale's ark was Peale himself, or rather, his copy: "So admirable a performance must have done great honor to his *genius* if it had been that of any other person," wrote Cutler, "but I think it is much more extraordinary that he should be able so perfectly to take himself" (*LJC* 1: 260).

I am interested in Peale's whimsical deception, which to me is more than a trick. In fact, it provides me with the central idea for the chapters that follow: the image of the naturalist who creates a collection and then puts himself into it, of the collector who is both *apart from* and *a part of* his collection, who is, to quote from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," both "in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it."¹

Linnaeus had hammered into the minds of aspiring naturalists the world over that the study of natural history, "simple, beautiful, and instructive," should consist mainly in the "collection, arrangement, and exhibition of the various productions of the earth."² Faced with a natural environment whose strange "productions" had once made the Puritan John Winthrop wince (he admitted that he had not seen "the like . . . either in *England* or *France*, or other parts"),³ American naturalists heeded Linnaeus's advice. If anything, they even more intensely felt the "urge to collect," that is, to make comprehensible, through the selection and

preservation of what appeared particularly interesting and noteworthy, a world that constantly eluded them. Often uncertain about their own place in a land that was theirs before they were the land's, they also felt the need to relate *themselves* to the collections they made. As anthropologists have maintained, it is through collections that the self that wants to "possess but cannot have it all" acquires a sense of identity.⁴ Gathering plants, birds, rocks, and artifacts, American naturalists were contributing their share to the "universal census," the "general mobilization" of the natural world, and, in doing so, they defined themselves.⁵

Once safely housed in the collection, the specimens that had been so rudely extracted from their original environments often threatened to become meaningless. As the example of Peale's collection with its artificial pond and lifelike trees shows, efforts had to be made to reinvent and manipulate new contexts for them. For most of the collectors in this study, this was not an outlandish challenge; Peale and others jumped at the opportunity of transforming relatively random assemblages of natural collectibles into works of art, "aesthetic experiences."⁶ In these American natural history collections, the older European tradition of the *Wunderkammer*, the cabinet of wonder, still lived on. However, as Manasseh Cutler realized, in exhibitions such as Peale's the strange and the familiar were interwoven in one complex fabric,⁷ and not only the wonders of nature but also the nature of wonder were given new meaning. The collection became a version of "art as play."⁸

It is with such forms of serious fun and the memorable images they have produced in American natural history that this study is primarily concerned. To some extent, it has been my ambition to do for pre-Darwinian American natural history what Gaston Bachelard has done, in a more general way, for our notions of home and shelter in *Poetics of Space*. This is why, in a sense, I like to think of *The Poetics of Natural History* as a book about "daydreams"—the daydreams of American natural history collectors.⁹ Since this study makes a number of assumptions about the common goals of science and literature, let me hasten to add that the embodiments of such dreams, whether material, verbal, or visual, usually took a form that was precise as well as wonderful, allowing subjective desires to meet, productively and fruitfully, with objectively perceived truths.

The waxen "Mr. Peale," in Manasseh Cutler's story, was holding an ivory sheet and a pen in his hand—an image of the collector caught in the act of producing yet another image. In collecting nature, American naturalists collected themselves, either through the physical objects they accumulated in their gardens or museums or through the words or images they created to reflect on what they and others had collected: drawings or paintings, letters, diary notes, travel accounts, formal essays, and autobiographies. Part one, "Displaying," deals with the former; part two, "Representing," addresses the latter form of collecting. The stories told in both parts share a common theme: how, in the American natural history collection, things human and things natural were, if only briefly, allowed to coincide. Such coincidences, however, became serious rather than playful after the advent of Darwinism in the United States, and the themes of the stories as well as the manner of their telling had to change.

Part one begins in John Bartram's disorderly botanical garden in Philadelphia (chapter 1), where the wild profusion of plants gathered on various collecting trips into uncharted territories became a metaphor for the insatiable curiosity of both the father and his son William.¹⁰ Chapter 2 further explores the ways in which the collection allowed the natural history collector to play with multiple images of the self. At a time when illusionistic impressions of reality were absent from natural history collections in Europe, Peale invented the diorama, the representation of animals in lifelike poses against realistic habitat backgrounds. As Peale's autobiography and paintings show, he did not hesitate to include himself in his forever expanding collection. Part one ends in New York, with the colorful Phineas Taylor Barnum, who bought up the shabby remnants of the playful Mr. Peale's collection and founded his own "American Museum." In Barnum's tawdry "halls of humbug" (Henry James), however, the real theme was no longer nature but humanity itself. Barnum's bizarre "connecting links" set the stage on which frightening theories of human descent easily turned into harmless fun. Natural history had become completely incidental to the main purpose of the collection—the collector's self-aggrandizement (chapter 3).

Collections have sometimes been identified as narratives, as stories told about things. Part two, in a sense, deals with such collecting stories from which the immediate traces of material collectibles have disappeared, giving way, often with surprising results, to carefully crafted assemblages of words or pictures. Chapter 4 reviews a gallery of images, verbal and visual, of snakes—ranging from the sleek-bodied, aggressive rattlers that both repulsed and fascinated Cotton Mather, Paul Dudley, and William Bartram to the self-contained, gloriously aloof *Crotalidae* gracing the pages of John Edwards Holbrook's *North American Herpetology*, like beautiful objets d'art. Looking into the "large, glistening eyes" of the most dangerous North American reptile, American naturalists created texts in which they were the narrators as well as the spellbound protagonists.

John James Audubon's paintings of American birds also characteristically take the form of visual dramas, and the texts he assembled in his *Ornithological Biography* (1831–1839) offer tension-packed stories of concealment and discovery in which Audubon himself appears alternately as the killer and the savior, the destroyer and the preserver of birds (chapter 5). Audubon's *Birds of America*, one of the last evocations of America as the land of plenty, of vast unencumbered spaces inhabited by numerous species yet to be discovered, marked the pinnacle of American natural history. The final chapter of part two (chapter 6) presents its discordant swan song: it reconstructs the progress of the Thayer Expedition through the Amazon Valley, where the Harvard professor and creationist Louis Agassiz had gone at the end of the Civil War to collect exotic fish as well as himself. Evidence was needed that Agassiz was right and Darwin wrong and that the world had been created not by happenstance but according to the wonderfully complete blueprint in the Divine Mind. Like Barnum, however, Agassiz was more a hoarder than a collector. The difference between him and earlier naturalists like William Bartram can best be gauged by the fact that Agassiz rarely seemed to see anything

for the first time; readily he turned from what was new to what he knew. The haphazard notes and casual travel impressions gathered in Louis and Elizabeth Agassiz's *Journey in Brazil* (1868) indicate that, in Agassiz's restless hands, collecting had ceased to be a risky search for the unknown and, instead, had turned into an affirmation of the already familiar. American natural history goes out with a whimper—with Americans amassing tons of Brazilian fish and taking snapshots of naked native women. The final image presented in *The Poetics of Natural History* is that of the young William James in Brazil, a collector *malgré lui*, watching in disbelief while locals were made to pose for shots meant to furnish Agassiz and other opponents of racial mixing with much-needed visual proof that some human beings were less equal than others.

None of the figures discussed in *The Poetics of Natural History*, with the exception of William Bartram, has so far been of great interest to the literary historian. In his *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida* (1791), the botanist Bartram, after all, came up with some unusual metaphors (William Hedges, in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, disparages them as "lush hyperbole" and deplores Bartram's "grandiloquence"),¹¹ wrote warmly about strange flowers and Native Americans and supplied great material to better writers, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Chateaubriand. Or so they say. Another naturalist featured in these pages, John James Audubon, took time off from his regular pursuits and composed a few memorable descriptions of life on the frontier, and he included bits of interesting landscape detail in his paintings for *The Birds of America*. But otherwise, mocks Edmund Wilson, Audubon's work had as "little relation to society" as the poems and stories of Poe.¹² And if Louis Agassiz, whom Van Wyck Brooks dubbed the "Johnny Appleseed" of American science, has occasionally received honorable mention in the hefty biographies of the great Transcendentalists, this is perhaps so because he once took Emerson on a camping trip to the Adirondacks.¹³ (Since he gets a page or two in Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading*, Agassiz has also put in some surprise appearances in studies of literary modernism.)¹⁴ Finally, several critics have taken a rather censorious interest in Charles Willson Peale because they believe that he abused his museum to promote a seriously skewed view of American national identity.¹⁵ But, as appealing as Peale, Audubon, and Agassiz might seem from the historian's point of view, who in her right mind would today turn to the hefty tomes of Peale's correspondence and Audubon's sloppy journals, with their rampant misspellings, in search of a "good read"? And, in all fairness, who would expect to find, in Vladimir Nabokov's lucky phrase, "aesthetic bliss" in Peale's rambling autobiography, unfinished and unrevised as it is—a text in which the author himself apparently lost interest?

By insisting that, nevertheless, these texts are, at their best, well worth reading and rereading, I have deliberately put myself at odds with a number of previous approaches to the field. For instance, my focus on the *aesthetic* aspects of American natural history leaves me vulnerable to the charge of political naiveté and open to the complaint that I am ignoring the active involvement of American naturalists, most of them dead white males, in the conquest and exploitation of the American

continent. If Mr. Peale in Manasseh Cutler's story seemed almost annoyingly happy, some critics would have pointed out to him that, in fact, he had little reason to be. In Mary Louise Pratt's eyes, for example, naturalists were the willing, if slightly befuddled, accomplices of Western imperialism. Armed with "nothing more than a collector's bag, a notebook and some specimen bottles," writes Pratt, they set out in search of "the bugs and the flowers," busily extracting every species from its native environment and callously placing it "in its appropriate spot the order-book, collection, or garden)," with its "new written, secular European name" attached to it.¹⁶ In Christopher Looby's view, too, American naturalists were more benighted than enlightened. Thomas Jefferson, Charles Willson Peale, and William Bartram, "refusing to be distracted by the mutability of natural objects" and enamored of the rigid categories of Linnaeus's system of nature, described a fixed, homogeneous, tightly structured natural world, even where the evidence told them otherwise. Looby finds a bit of comfort only in the realization that this blessed rage for order usually foundered on the rocky roads of reality itself. Searching for harmony and peace, the Quaker William Bartram, in Looby's reading, inevitably found himself contemplating revolutionary chaos, "a nearly random set of motions, a concatenation of fortuitous processes, an intersection of unpredictable transformations."¹⁷ Other voices, more subdued, have joined the growing critical chorus: Paul Semonin, for example, has retraced the manifold connections between American nationalism and American natural history. The stuffed birds, prehistoric bones, and botanical specimens collected by American naturalists, argues Semonin, created a disingenuous historical narrative that made white Americans happily forget the "unacceptable antiquity of Native American civilization."¹⁸

While I do not want to minimize (and have in fact profited from) arguments that organize themselves around the concepts of domination and appropriation, my study of American natural history charts the emergence of a Western self much less stable than such theories could comfortably accommodate. Put differently, my response to Pratt and Looby, developed more fully in the following chapters, would be that by placing themselves at the center of their collections—by letting, for example, the waxen "Mr. Peale" take over from Charles Willson Peale—collectors often successfully, and interestingly, "decentered" themselves.

My argument that these premodern collecting narratives are worth reading compels me to take umbrage with yet another camp of critics: those who would fault me for seeing literariness where it isn't and overlooking science where it is. In the first wide-ranging survey of natural history writing from Captain John Smith to John Burroughs, Philip Marshall Hicks warns us, sternly, that "great prose is not to be expected in the natural history field."¹⁹ And even though literature, the "field" from which Hicks and others presumably expect the enjoyment of "great prose," has undergone extensive redefinition since 1924 when Hicks penned his remarks, critical opinion has apparently not swayed much in favor of "the art of natural history." Consider Pamela Regis's recent attempt to rehabilitate Bartram's *Travels*, along with Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* or

J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, as "works of science" rather than "works of belles lettres."²⁰

Be that as it may, I do not find the opposite view very useful either. In his excellent study of eighteenth-century naturalists, *In the Presence of Nature*, David Scofield Wilson eagerly foregrounds the *literary*—or, rather, the *semiliterary*—element in natural history at the expense of its scientific credibility. He carefully distinguishes between natural history and "nature reportage," designating the former as the province of true systematic science and the latter, cheerfully embraced by American naturalists such as John Bartram, as the genre in which free-lance, self-educated journeymen, only peripherally acquainted with the grand theories that justified their haphazard activities, wrote down their "simple observations" meant to aid minds greater than theirs in the further refinement of their overarching systems and abstractions. "Nature reporters" wrote essays and travelogues rather than handbooks and scientific essays. No wonder that, leaping from intuitive descriptions of the "when, where and who of occurrences" to "guesses of why," these reporters, instead of dutifully contributing to a fuller understanding of the myriad phenomena of nature, sometimes ended up perpetrating hoaxes instead of promoting the facts.²¹

Wilson's argument does not require a detailed rebuttal here; suffice it to say that while Linnaeus, the author of the magisterial *Systema naturae*, did not think it beneath him to write a vivid account of his travels through Lapland,²² a simple "nature reporter" and traveler like John Bartram contributed notes on American plants to the 1751 edition of Thomas Short's handbook *Medicina Britannica* and felt secure enough in his knowledge of taxonomy to disagree with some of Linnaeus's authoritative classifications: "Poor Lineus . . . I always thought he crowded too many species into one genus" (CJB 414).

In this book I have consistently preferred the term "natural history" to such misleading alternatives as "nature reportage" or "nature writing." I have done so for a reason. While my own theoretical program could perhaps be described as a form of *literary anthropology*, I do not engage in any of the usual celebrations of the liberating power of "literature" that mark and, in my opinion, mar current approaches to the field.²³ In regarding the texts and visual images created by American naturalists as products of the *instructed* imagination, I refuse to treat "art" and "science" as opposites. Such a distinction would be historically inadequate, anyway. Up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, literature and science, for example, were generally understood as equal partners in a unitary endeavor.²⁴ In 1799, it is true, Wordsworth had sneered at the naturalist, "a finger-slave" who would coolly "peep and botanize / Upon his mother's grave."²⁵ But a few years later, the American scientist Benjamin Smith Barton, "the greatest botanist of his age" (Daniel Boorstin), when giving a speech before the Philadelphia Linnean Society, still saw nothing wrong in cheering natural history as the science "of just and happy arrangements; and of *beautiful and correct theories*" (my emphasis).²⁶ It was only by the middle of the century that the natural sciences—as the cognitive encounter with a clearly definable material world and

as the proper province of specially trained professionals—had clearly separated themselves from the arts, which now had become the acceptable mode of describing one's existential encounters with a social and personal world.²⁷

It would of course be wrong, as Lawrence Buell has warned us, to look at all of early nineteenth-century thought as leading up to Darwin—an assessment “more true poetically than literally.”²⁸ But perhaps it is not inappropriate to regard the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and its subsequent reception in America as marking the official end of certain accustomed ways of speaking about “Nature” (a word that Darwin, in the second edition of his book, changed to lower case). Now that it had become clear that, like the barnacles, the ducks, and the bears, human beings, too, were subject to the endless processes of struggle and change that had shaped the history of the organic world, they could no longer perceive themselves as being both part of and apart from the entangled family network of nature. Forever branded with the “indelible stamp” of their own “lowly origin,” it now suddenly seemed that humans had little reason for arrogance.²⁹ As Darwin, a superior writer himself, knew only too well, his theory raised crucial problems for the form in which such insights could and should be rendered. Among other things, Darwin tried to cleanse his language of all traces of human will and intention, often unsuccessfully so, as Gillian Beer has demonstrated.³⁰ It is mainly as a symbolic, cautionary figure, therefore, that he appears at the end of chapters 4 through 6. The publication of *The Origin of Species*, a book in which humankind had disappeared from the center of inquiry, marked the point at which natural history collectors began to lose control over their happy self-projections, fearing that perhaps they themselves would soon be nothing more than exhibits gathering dust in collections that had become obsolete.

The Poetics of Natural History attempts to remove some of these layers of dust and to describe pre-Darwinian American natural history at its best—namely, in those moments when it successfully straddled, in the words of Vladimir Nabokov, an experienced butterfly collector himself, “the high ridge where the mountainside of ‘scientific’ knowledge joins the opposite slope of ‘artistic’ imagination.”³¹ Located at the crossroads of Linnean taxonomy and belles lettres, wavering between the demands of precise description and the seductions of narrative, American natural history, as I would summarize the central thesis of this book, only superficially avoids what it very often becomes—a form of autobiography.

A final word about my general method. I have not striven for completeness, nor have I attempted to offer a continuous history of pre-Darwinian American natural history.³² Historians of science will miss some names; historians of literature will deplore the omission of others. In part this reflects my ambition to promote less widely known and read figures over those more frequently admired and written about, but some of these absences also result from a need to reduce and condense material so vast that it has defied my own “rage for order.” Collecting entails selecting, since, as James Clifford has reminded us, one “cannot have it all.” In fact, this is how my own role in the following chapters could most usefully be described—as that of a collector of curiosities, a guide through a cabinet of collectors,

through a museum of naturalists that has room for more. Being a sort of collector myself, I realize that, like other collectors, I shall have to live “with a great deal of ambiguity” about my “prospects for producing closure.”³³ I do not apologize for the overabundance of detail in my account; after all, the collectors I write about were convinced that the grand story of nature could be told only by the restless accumulation of little things. Readers of this book will inevitably construct their own stories from what they see, read, and remember. They should feel free to design their own paths through my collection and know that, while my chapters—the rooms of my museum, as it were—are part of one slowly unfolding argument, or a continuous tour, each of them should be worth a separate visit, too.

In sum, the purpose of the tour I offer in *The Poetics of Natural History* might most simply be described thus: to help dispel the still widespread assumption (here articulated by Mark Kipperman) that only “belles lettres” reveals to us our presence as desiring, storytelling beings within the concrete world of experience.³⁴ After all, what Dr. Manasseh Cutler brought home with him from his visit to Mr. Peale's museum, where the collector had duplicated himself and thus duped his visitors, was . . . a good story. Peale invented it, and this is how Cutler retells it: as a carefully staged tale of deception, starting with a perfect illusion and a complete withholding of information, and ending in the final amused and amusing disclosure of the truth. “To what perfection is this art capable of being carried,” Cutler exclaimed, imagining that his relatives—and perhaps he himself, too—could be similarly preserved for future generations, “in perfect likeness.” Thus Manasseh Cutler's story about “Mr. Peale” even has a moral, expressing the hope, prevalent in all of antebellum American natural history, that the collector's art could defeat the “ravages of time” (*LJC* 1: 260). It would have bothered Mr. Peale or Dr. Cutler only slightly that, in this view, there is little indeed that separates preserved humans from stuffed ducks.