The Poetic Thing (On Poetry and Deconstruction)

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> 'Un texte n'est un texte que s'il cache au premier regard, au premier venu, la loi de sa composition et la règle de son jeu.'[1]

Dictation

Poetry does not come, does not arrive, and does not happen, except by way of the announcement (news) of its disappearance (its law). The poetic, the name and the thing, would be that which remarks its disappearance: it would be that which appears in the complication of a notice of its disappearance. Or so we are to learn.

In '*Che cos'è la poesia*' Derrida proposes a deceptively traditional — even classical — account of the poetic.[2] Situated between visual art and music by way of the kind of aesthetic classification that may be traced from Kant through Hegel, poetry is characterized in terms of its powers of condensation. The Freudian complication (condensation as *Verdichtung*, the dense compressions of dream substitutions) may be does not depart much from classical traditions that mark a poetic treatment as rendering the most profound topic (the 'idea' itself) more secretly accessible through arts of memory, via the formal memorization of its remarkable lines, which may be learned by heart. But Derrida adheres to somewhat novel rules for writing this account, rules adopted apparently in connection with the topic itself (the poetic). Deconstruction optimally implies a writing that lets itself be affected by the signature of that to which the writing is to be given

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(the other). The complication now is that something exactly of this structure (the structure of the signature of the other in writing) seems also to mark what is called the poetic. So it's important to establish some specifics, a demand to which '*Che cos'è la poesia*' responds. The *réponse* to the question, at once the answer (the answer to the question, what is poetry?) and that to which the answer refers (poetry itself), combines in the question's addressee the position of both subject and object, as if the answer has to take place on a kind of split level of discourse that is neither quite constative nor purely performative. Poetry must (be the) answer (to) the question, what is poetry? 'Even though it remains inapparent, since disappearing is its law, the answer *sees itself (as) dictated (dictation)* [*la* réponse *se voit dictée*]. I am *a* dictation, pronounces poetry . . . ' (288/9). The response sees itself as dictation. Something that cannot be seen sees itself in its dictation. In letting itself be seen it disappears. Disappearing is its law. Some caution is required here because to the extent that anything ever appears, as we see, disappearing is its law. According to so many great traditions its mode of appearance is its fatal disappearing. With a *dictée* we might seem to be faced with nothing more than mild differences between the hearable and the seeable although these mild differences for a time can mean everything.

So poetry distinguishes itself at least to begin with through dictation. *La dictée*: an echo across languages (Dichtung-Verdichtung-diction-dictation-dictée) implicates poetry with situations more obviously reminiscent in recent history of the school setting. A dictation: the child taking down in writing what she hears the teacher say (a passage of classical verse or prose or something made up for the occasion), a test for the arts of listening and accurate writing. In dictation you become habituated to the task, for with repetition you learn to hear the rhythms of speech, the maybe inaudible expressions and gestures of the speaker, and even without hearing (those dictations whereby a passage is left unspoken for the student to complete on their own) a sense of what might be right (diction). After listening intently to a sentence (perhaps repeated a second time) the child having memorized it writes it down, observing correct tense and gender agreements, and the correct spelling of words where differences are not heard as such but must be shown in writing (as in *difference* and *differance*: much of the homophonic play in deconstruction recalls the hazards of dictée). Similar tests are

carried out in the music school (the child listens to the teacher play a passage and then writes it down in correct notation) and in literature, where a dictée might be learned by heart. Needless to say in the age of the learning-centered classroom this kind of thing has fallen out of fashion (except perhaps in some language classes). Poetry dictation would be a remnant of a classical education in which it was assumed, or merely claimed with the disingenuousness of a head teacher, that noble thoughts of beauty, goodness and truth are more easily learned in the forms of correspondingly beautiful sound patterns. Even in a nihilistic age this might count for something, for the correspondence of the word to truth, beauty, goodness and so on carries on whether we rejoice or mourn their supposed radical absence.[3]

The complication here is that a dictation does not require such thoughts and on the contrary might be better accomplished without knowledge. As Derrida writes, 'you are asked to know how to renounce knowledge' (288/9). You need to know how to write without knowing. So the answer takes the peculiar form of a dictée: a received knowledge given back with appropriate diction. The formula also conjures Socrates, whom Derrida discovers 'demolishing' writing in *The Phaedrus*. In order to identify this writing as 'non truth,' in the form of 'repeating without knowing,' Socrates must renounce knowledge of it: 'One should note most especially that what writing will later be accused of — repeating without knowing — here defines the very approach that leads to the statement and the determination of its status' (92).[4] In order to describe writing as repeating without knowing Socrates borrows the narrative content of the myth of Theuth. No *logos on* writing is available, for writing must show up as the other of the logos (*ana-logos*). So while writing and myth are equated, on one side, in opposition to *logos* and dialectics, on the other, Socrates must still fall back on myth (and on writing) in order to establish the opposition. Derrida will go on to identify Socrates himself with writing in several ways (the 'Envois' of *La carte postale* develops this to extreme levels) but now a similar structure seems to be attributable to poetry. Poetry is not open to a rational account that nonetheless seems to require it.

Poetry *as* dictation evokes another semi-classical theory according to which the poet serves as a kind of 'radio' able to collect transmission from the 'invisible world.'[5] The technical externalization of the poetic

(it has nothing to do with the notion of artistic expression) comes as a notably modern (or modernist) conceit but as with anything that calls on a tele-technology it also appeals to ancient things. To pick Derrida up where I just left him mid sentence, in dictation: 'I am a dictation, pronounces poetry, learn me by heart, copy me down, guard and keep me, look out for me, look at me, dictated dictation [*dictée*], right before your eyes: soundtrack, *wake*, trail of light, photograph of the feast in mourning' (288/289). The passage ends with these icons of convergence between passage (sound or light) and visual image. Not simply a combination of say the musical and visual but a passage of images, which in each case relates to passage in images (images passing, images of passing, and so on): the motif of the *bande-son*, of the music produced to accompany film, could strike us as a kind of updating of Hegel, an argument (in deconstruction) that makes its way as application or repetition *mutatis mutandis*: a dictée.

Teaching

A new complication now arises, for having glimpsed something of Hegel in what sounds to me like an allusive repetition it's time to put the two together more critically: deconstruction and poetry. The common ground might be teaching. Poetry as a kind of teacher: in Hegel's classical formula, 'poetry has always been and is still the most universal and widespread teacher of the human race.'[6] A teacher from whom you desire to learn, in Derrida's no less classical axiom: 'the poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart; *imparare a memoria*.'[2] The slight incline between poetry, as the teacher, and the poetic, as that which you desire to learn from poetry, suggests without revealing an interval where much may happen in the course of teaching. The idiom 'learning by heart' perhaps describes the movement of such an event. In 'Where a Teaching Body Begins and How it Ends' Derrida fixes on this interval as a way of addressing the question of founding a possible teaching body (in this case *Greph* but already looking ahead to the College international de philosophie).[7] The role of dictée emerges here as the form of a teaching that might at any moment be reactivated without guarantees (which is the point) beneath or even alongside the more narrowly construed practice of the repeater (the *répétiteur* of French teaching institutions).

Derrida identifies in the 18th century notion of the dictée a practice 'synonymous with teaching.' The dictée, not after all contained in the school setting, here emerges as a kind of model for higher education and in particular for the teaching of philosophy — in the ideal case (although this wouldn't be absolutely necessary for a dictée) involving set texts and a plan of readings and productive responses. Derrida: 'The "dictation" of course repeated a fixed and controlled content, but it was not confused with "repetition" in the narrow sense' (132/82). Repetition in the narrow sense refers more generally to a situation in which the teacher removes himself from the teaching he passes on in a perpetual chain of such removals: 'the repeater effaces himself, repeats his effacement, remarks it by pretending to leave the prince student — who must in turn begin again, spontaneously reengender the cycle of *paideia*, or rather let it engender itself principally as auto-encyclopaedia' (137/86). The auto-encyclopaedic process (like that of the phoenix preparing its own pyre in order to give birth to itself from its ashes) and the dictée share the fact that they each must abide within the economy of repetition, under the law of the repeatable mark. This seems indubitable, and as Derrida writes: 'The teaching body, as *organon* of repetition, is as old as the sign and has the history of the sign' (130/81). With this economy and the consistency of its law comes deconstruction (for want of a better word, although as Derrida always insists, many others would be as good).

It's appropriate therefore that the remarks on deconstruction in the opening pages of 'Where a Teaching body Begins' are among the clearest of Derrida's programmatic statements about it. First, the concern with teaching: 'Deconstruction … has … always in principle concerned the apparatus and function of teaching in general, and the apparatus and function of philosophy in particular and par excellence' (119/73). Deconstruction is concerned with teaching in general (I add that it thus shares this concern in a certain way with poetry) and with philosophy in particular as the exemplary teaching sphere. The concern of deconstruction with philosophy would begin to materialize in the form of a dictée, of a signature taken and a counter signature given in response and in repetition. Two complications follow in the form of the two sides of the program. On one side lies the deconstruction of philosophy, 'of phallogocentrism … of the onto-theological principle, of metaphysics, of the question "'what is?"

of the subordination of all fields of questioning to the encyclopeadic instance and so on' (119/73). On this side the idea of a 'rigorous deconstruction' implies not so much the kind of test to which critique would subject something, but a question of survival, nonetheless, of what remains, what survives, what endures deconstruction and endures with deconstruction, as deconstruction. What could happen in philosophy, and in philosophy as teaching, that would survive deconstruction? The question leads as a matter of course to the other side: 'to conclude from a *project* of deconstruction that we are facing the pure and simple, the *immediate* disappearance of philosophy and its teaching … would be to abandon, once more, the field of struggle to very specific forces … empiricism, technocracy, moralism, or religion (indeed all of them at the same time)' (119–120/73). The point of a deconstruction of phallogocentrism, therefore, would be to save what survives it, save it by putting it in danger: the structure that deconstruction finds everywhere *in fact* animating the entire philosophical tradition, and all this in the formal response of a humble dictée (a repetition that knows how to renounce knowledge). And the purpose of saving what puts itself in danger in these ways lies in maintaining, and reestablishing where necessary, old ways in resistance to trends that terrorize the fields of teaching, trends whose adherence to various kinds of ontotheological principle pass over the paradox of philosophy in silence. The paradox of philosophy in deconstruction therefore lies in our inability to know exactly what it is that survives (that remains, that endures).

Photography

The role of the dictée, and of the signature that marks this kind of repetition against that of the self effacing repeater, seems most obvious perhaps (though to see it like this would be an error too I think) in the readings of poetic texts. When asked, in the interview 'Heidegger, l'enfer des philosophes,' whether he adapts his style to the objects he fastens on (the immediate reference is to Joyce), Derrida replies: 'without mimeticism, but while incorporating in some way the other's signature. With some luck, another text can begin to take shape, another event, irreducible to either the author or the work about which nonetheless one should speak as faithfully as possible' (Points 201/188).[8] With this kind of statement it's possible to build

a sense of how a signature might be formed. Deconstruction, I suppose like poetry, must have its thing. Another reference to Hegel raises the stakes. The reason you'd need the entire encyclopaedia before you could give an account of poetry (or the poetic) lies in the ways in which it achieves its place through a complex set of transitions and distinctions. It doesn't merely move between music and painting; its modes of distinction are manifold. It is distinct from prose, for instance, in two ways. On one hand it is more primitive, more fundamental, in its expression, in that it predates prose (as 'a knowing that does not yet separate the universal from its living existence in the individual'). Poetry is the original form of human expression. But on the other hand, in the age of prose, poetry must distinguish itself in a similar way to that by which philosophy separates itself from the sediment of the understanding. Mina Loy's definition captures this sense of the poetic: 'Poetry is prose bewitched,' she writes in 'Modern Poetry,' 'a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea.'[9] Poetry doesn't express the universal in an abstract way, in the way philosophy and scientific thinking do (thinking things respectively through established interconnection or merely in their relations) but it does so as 'unity' animated in the thing; and so the unifying force in poetry is 'made to work in secret' (937). The language of poetry figures the universal of philosophy in secret through the mediation of the language of things.[10] Poetry's law is not only its disappearance, then, but also the disappearance of its law. And the disappearance of its thing: 'The aim of poetry is imagery and speech, not the thing talked about or its existence in practice' (974). The thing has nonetheless made its appearance, and so the universal is governed as much by the law of its replacement by imagery and language as the thing is by its disappearing into appearance in the poem (which thus mediates again between language of philosophy and language of things[11]).

Derrida writes about the law of the thing in *Signéponge* (in what comes candidly as a dictée of Francis Ponge): 'Not the law which rules over things, the one which science and philosophies know, but the *dictated* law [la loi dictée]. I speak of a law dictated as if in the first person, by the thing, with an intractable rigour, as an implacable command.'[12] The passage cannot be taken as a merely sentential observation but rather it takes part in a staging that puts the law of the thing to the test in the phrase 'Francis Ponge will be

my thing' (10/11). It's Ponge's law. What I think can be established here is this: the complex relation of deconstruction to philosophy in a certain way repeats the relation proposed by philosophy (which might as easily be the philosophy of the poet as that of Hegel) between poetry and the thing. Philosophy, then, could be the poetic *thing* of deconstruction. Not poetry as such but a kind of writing in relation to philosophy that can approximate poetry in its relation to the evanescent thing. The paradigm would not be a written or spoken form of discourse but something at once more ancient and more recent: the photograph.[13] In photography it is possible to draw attention to the ways in which a thing, to the extent that it appears at all, is lost. In *Copy, Archive, Signature* Derrida uses the idiom of the *retrait* (also recalling the arguments from 'Memoirs of the Blind') in response to a question about the relation to death in photography. The re-trait (or withdrawal) implies both appearing and disappearing (poetry's law if we return briefly to '*Che cos'è la poesia?*) in a movement of 'drawing' by which the line drawn delineates the disappearance of the thing that appears when the line is with-drawn. Photography in the modern technical sense thus helps to illustrate a basic condition of perception, according to which the relation between perceiving and the perceived must be thought as a kind of 'acti/passivity,' the perceived thing at once negated and produced in a line that draws as it withdraws: 'The withdrawal [*le retrait*] — let us keep this word — designates at once the *re-marking* and the erasure of the line: the mark is withdrawn in it. The 'great art' of this double re-treat or with-drawal, no less for photography than for literature, for painting and for drawing, is to grasp this line or this instant, certainly, but in grasping it to let it be lost, to mark the fact that "this took place, it is lost," and everything that one sees, keeps and looks at [*garde et regard*] now is the being lost of what must be lost, what is first of all bound to be lost. And the signature of the loss would be marked in what keeps and does not lose, what keeps (from) loss.'[14] The signature of a dictée that steered a course between invention and faithful commentary would thus be something like a photograph (not merely a photocopy) of the text in passing, a record of the loss of what is lost, in a repetition without which the lost thing would not have appeared.

Hegel knew neither photographs nor cinema but reading the early writings you might end up thinking that these already neonatal

technologies have some role to play. More particularly in the lectures on aesthetics poetry occupies the movement of transition combining the aesthetic extremes of the visual arts and music: 'poetry, the art of speech, is the third term, the totality, which unites in itself … the two extremes, i.e. the visual arts and music.' Some general lines can be drawn. Poetry would be whatever fulfills the conditions, in the sphere of aesthetics, according to which *Geist* gives birth to itself from itself in a passage between space and time that unifies them in a work. In Derrida's allusive repetition the poem captures in its image a wake, a *sillage*, as in those light trails in night photographs: time passing captured as a trail of light held in the frame thanks to long exposures. You see the passage in a still. The still shows passing. It draws attention to what in the image is lost, to the loss of the thing lost, a 'photograph of the Feast in mourning.'[15]

Poetry and photography therefore meet at the site of this disappearance, where what one sees must at once be kept and reserved for the gaze in terms of its loss. If an imperative exists that would somehow mark what we call deconstruction it would have to do with this element of keeping and looking-at (this *garde et regard*), this constant attention paid to the structure and law of the loss of lost things. It's the kind of thing, then, for which no method, no hermeneutic key, exists that would enable anyone to retrieve it. And with the theme of the lost key (of method, of hermeneutics, of interpretation and their interpretations) we return to the game of the text itself (son jeu).

The Key

One of the earliest poems of Edward Thomas (it started out as an autobiographical prose piece) is the 1914 'Old Man.'[16] Its title also stands for the thing, the flowering plant (known by science as Southernwood or Artemisia Abrotanum). It's also known colloquially as Lad's-love.[17] The poem begins by noting a perplexity in the relation of the names 'Old Man, or Lad's-love' to the thing named: 'the names/Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is' (lines 5–6). Three distinct scenes are staged in the remaining stanzas (free form iambic pentameter signaling no doubt Thomas's quite fiercely conservative adherence to a great tradition). In the first: the bush by the door, the writer's young daughter picking at it, 'snipping the tips and shriveling/

The shreds' (13–14). Even in the crafted presence of the scene another scene is evoked:

> Not a word she says;
> And I can only wonder how much hereafter
> She will remember, with that bitter scent,
> Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees
> Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door,
> A low thick bush beside the door, and me
> Forbidding her to pick. (18–24)

The scene in the present gives way to a projection (the writer projecting a future memory into the scene of his child). But this (projected future memory) in turn gives way to a present failure of memory: 'Where I first met the bitter scent is lost./I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,/Sniff them and think and sniff again and try/Once more to think what I am remembering,/Always in vain' (25–29). And the final lines (among the most celebrated in Thomas's small oeuvre) offer in the classical form of a negation ('I have mislaid the key') a kind of present absence:

> No garden appears, no path, no hoar green bush
> Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
> Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
> Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end. (36–39).

The merging of temporal traces here stages in a single image something like an infinite feedback system: the writer takes what appears as the scene of a possible memory for the one who appears, and so supplements the loss of a memory on his own part with the present scene, in this way intimating that this too will be lost to the future memory (doubling in the projection the experience of the child with his own). Nothing here ever makes up for the loss; and the reality of the present scene comes to us precisely in this way, as a negation, an absence, the 'not-there' of a memory to come (the dark and nameless 'avenue'). The names, moreover, could easily be synonyms independently of the plant they name (Old Man or father is Lad's Love) the lost desire of a child in the sphere of the nom/n du père ('forbidding her to pick'). And while I don't intend here to go down

that route, what makes it possible should be noted: the hallucinogenic qualities of these fragments of word (the shriveling and shredding, the snipping of the tips) which so much *produce* in its absence a memory that is absent. Conversely, it is this quality that brings into some kind of temporary yet nevertheless absolute presence the thing. The thing, poetry (whatever it is), not there in the presence of that through which it appears, the poetic thing, what is it? The turn from prose to poetry seems all the more necessary, for the answer to the question, the mislaid key, can only be given in the form of a mislaid key: the key is its loss. Not just any thematic interpretation but a single inevitable look upon that which in giving itself to interpretation removes itself.

Notes

[1] Jacques Derrida, *La dissemination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 79. 'A text is not a text unless it hides from the first glance, from the first comer, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.'

[2] Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia' in *Points: Interviews, 1974–1994*, edited by Elizabeth Weber, translated by Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Derrida, *Points de suspension: Entretiens* (Paris: Gallilée, 1992).

[3] See Shakespeare, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle,' in *The Narrative and Other Poems*, edited by Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen (London: Arden, 2007) 91.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *La dissemination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972) 74–5.

[5] Jack Spicer, *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, edited by Peter Gizzi, 1998. See also *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance*, by Lew Ellingham and Kevin Killian, 1998.

[6] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics,* Volume 2, 972; Hegel, *Werke*, Volume 15, 239–40.

[7] The group for research on the teaching of philosophy (GREPH) was set up in 1974 in order primarily to combat the so called Haby bill, which proposed to severely curtail the teaching of philosophy in French schools; the College International de Philosophy was founded in 1983 to provide kinds of teaching and research in philosophy that are marginalized or even excluded by existing accredited institutions.

[8] The stricture evoked here can be found in several places but perhaps the clearest is a short paragraph from 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes,' which outlines 'two infidelities, an impossible choice,' in *Psyché: inventions de l'autre*, nouvelle edition

augmentée (*Paris: Galilée,* 1987/98) 283. Translated in *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) 45.

[9] 'Modern Poetry,' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger Conover (New York: Noonday Press, 1996) 157. Loy's poems often come at first as enigmatic puzzles, the linguistic obscurity rewarding a reader by giving way at length to a precise clarity in relation to the thing for which they function as medium, for example (no mere example this either) the moon: 'A silver Lucifer/serves/ cocaine in cornucopia/To some somnambulists/of adolescent thighs/draped/in satirical draperies' (from memory).

[10] Keats makes a subdivision: 'Things real — such as Sun, Moon & Stars and passages of Shakespeare — Things semi-real such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist — and Nothings which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit.' John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Routledge, 1970) 73. See also Michael O'Neill, 'Lamia: Real and Semireal,' in *The Challenge of Keats: Becentenary Essays* 1795–1995, edited by Allen Conrad Christensen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1979) 125–142.

[11] Heidegger's account of philosophy's destruction of the thing gives way at length to his infamous 'anaesthetic' or 'anti-philosophical' presentation, 'setting-forth-of-truth-in-the-work,' apparently dismissed by Derrida in 'Che cos'è la poesia' along with the phoenix and the eagle (296/297). See Heidegger, *Holzwege*, (Frankfurt: Klosterman, 1993) 5–25; translated in *Off the Beaten Track*, by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 4–19.

[12] Derrida, *Signéponge/Signsponge*, translated by Richard Rand (New York: Columbia university Press, 1984) 10–11/12–13. Serious consideration of the thing in relation to poetry and its law, its appearing and disappearing, requires some further analysis particularly in relation to Heidegger's 'Origin of the Work of Art' and Maurice Blanchot's 'Literature and the Right to Death,' both of which bear the imprint of Hegel.

[13] Photography appears in a privileged way rather consistently yet often unobtrusively across Derrida's entire oeuvre. 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes,' *Right of Inspection* and 'Memoires of the Blind' are basic sources. The now indispensible late text, written as a preface to accompany the publication of photographs by Jean-François Bonhomme, *Demeure, Athènes*, was published in 1996 in French and Modern Greek and in a French text, accompanied by Bonhomme's photographs, in 2009. An English translation appeared in 2010 as *Athens, Still Remains*: *The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham, 2010). See also Michael Naas, ' "Now Smile":

Recent Developments in Jacques Derrida's Work on Photography,' *South Atlantic Quarterly* 2011 110(1): 205–222.

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, edited with an introduction by Gerhard Richter, translated by Jeff Fort (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) 18–19.

[15] 'Jesus said to his disciples, "Within a short time, you will lose sight of me, but soon after that you shall see me again." At this time all of the disciples asked one another, "What can he mean, within a short time you will lose sight of me, but soon after that you will see me and he did not say that he is going back to the Father?" They kept asking, "What did he mean by this short time?" "We do not know what he is talking about."' John 16 16–18.

[16] *The Annotated Collected Poems*, edited by Edna Longley (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2008) 36.

[17] Also: Boy's Love, Oldman, Wormwood, Lover's Plant, Appleringie, Garderobe, Our Lord's Wood, Maid's Ruin, Garden Sagebrush, European Sage, Southern Wormwood, Sitherwood and Lemon Plant.