“Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel, Antoine Doinel”: François Truffaut’s “Trilogy”

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Names

The voice of the narrator in François Truffaut’s L’Homme qui aimait les femmes (The Man Who Loved Women, 1977) summarizes the happenings of that film in a little poem, which Gilles Jacob and Claude de Givray, long-time compatriots and collaborators of Truffaut’s, choose as a concluding epigraph to their collection of his Letters. Posed modestly against a portrait of the filmmaker, which bears the caption, “François Truffaut died in hospital on 21 October 1984,” it reads:

Out of all of that,
something
nevertheless will remain,
a trace,
a testament,
a rectangular object,
320 bound pages.
What we call a book.

It is certainly interesting to consider that after Truffaut’s long career as a critic and essayist, then a filmmaker, what “nevertheless” will remain is books, which is to say, for us, writings about or invoking him that are as permanent as his images – books, indeed, like this one you are reading, which contains these pages. But even more interesting with regard to that little poetic statement is the taxonomic problem it raises and muses upon, in this particular case our way of identifying a collection
of pages that are rectangular when bound together, and objective, and testamentary. If, looked at from one side, the book is a defined form, such that a writer might set out to write one and a reader go hunting to find one to read, from another side a book is a mere conventionality for naming, regarding, and using a certain kind of material, in this case, again, a binding of pages that constitute traces of some world. This latter is the taxonomic issue I want to take as my given, that we have a habit of collecting facts and attributes, packing and summarizing them in an objective unity, as it were, and then giving it a name to which we can point, over and over until our reference is automatic and the name becomes synonymous with the thing to which it has been attached. I mention that Truffaut uses this idea in his work, and that his friends and co-workers associate it especially with him, in order at least to suggest that taxonomical issues and the work of Truffaut are not alien to one another; perhaps even that he had a certain fascination with the problems of taxonomy; perhaps even that for all his volubility (he spoke quickly) he was in some interior way silent and passive, a man who wondered at our facile capability for addressing and manipulating the world.

Types

An astute student of the difficulties and intrigues of naming and taxonomical division was the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. “Nothing,” writes Gould, in a discussion of the taxonomic obsession and genius of Vladimir Nabokov, “matches the holiness and fascination of accurate and intricate detail” (“No Science” 47); and in his convoluted and brilliant essay “How the Vulva Stone Became a Brachiopod” he enters into a prolix discussion of the categorization of fossils, showing how over time it became possible for students to see, catalogue, and use resemblances that evinced connection “by zoological affinity rather than by external appearance” (69). Central to Gould’s analysis in general, and central to an understanding of the perils and glories of false and relevant taxonomies, is an appreciation of the fundamental challenge facing those who would wish to group objects and facts and, on the basis of such grouping, make generalizations. A case worth examining in this respect is that of François Truffaut, many of whose films exhibit certain “logical” but not “apparent” resemblances and may thus be classified together in a system that is not superficially evident.

Truffaut himself points out this possibility, in an epistolary comment to the French film distributor Roger Diamantis that the theme of Les