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Rank Growth

In the foliage of its tree in New Guinea, the green python is almost invisible. It slithers forwards and creeps backwards, seemingly like the somewhat too rapid growth or dwindling of one of the branches on which it crawls. In the uterus of the archeologist Elisabeth Shaw, heroine in Ridley Scott's "Prometheus" from 2012, a fetus is growing at an accelerated rate. It is mutating like a tumor. In one of its adult shapes, it will appear as a dragon-like insect that, for the film "Alien", Switzerland's Hansruedi Giger created in a modern and magnified image of evil, a diabolical temptress that has replaced the serpent in paradise.

The slow movements of plants are not the result of intentional will. But also in animals, the digestive tract, heart, pupils and much more move without any intention, based on the promptings of the vegetative nervous system. Like buds and flowers, the sexual organs swell and open. Decision-free growing, swelling, waning and wilting in animal organisms were once seen as demonic. If "nature" is that which occurs "by itself", while the animal body, above all the human body, is "actually" dependent on intent, then in subjects undergoing will-less growth and movement, there is something that intervenes in their autonomy. Life processes without intelligent guidance are, on the one hand, as symbolically innocent as the lilies of the field. But rank growth that thwarts any kind of planning remains uncanny to subjects who have free will and insist on their autonomy.

A garden is willed nature. Its growth is incorporated within a planned framework. When, in the Ruhr's industrial heartland, bushes and trees grow wild on the grounds of abandoned steel factories, we speak of nature that has "reconquered" the terrain, like an army in battle that regains a lost hillock. A manner of speaking that recalls an "old" understanding of nature when man with his technical know-how had to "fight" nature's brutalities, something we still do but describe differently. The growth of a child in the womb is natural. Perhaps its conception was planned, like flowers in a garden. But uterine cancer is hardly addressed as a part of nature. It is not good, but "malign" – like the mythical serpent. It also grows, but it is conventionally called a "diseased growth" that the doctor hardly considers "natural" and must challenge.

For to "us" today, "natural" has mostly positive connotations. The forest is no longer a dark, menacing place where the evil lindwurm, the giant descendent of the serpent, resides, but is the "green lung" of the planet that "breathes" in tandem with it. The sea is not a desert of water in which sailors find their grave, but the origin of life whose vastness provides the space for most of the organisms in the world. The still current perspective on "nature" as seen by John Stuart Mill in the 19th century as an association of peril and suffering has today mostly disappeared. But are we not all, as Mill thought, guiltlessly condemned to a natural death that only the malice of a fellow man can forestall? Mill in his essay "On Nature" asks how would we judge an agency that destroys everything that it engenders.

The fact that every growth goes back to the death of a seed was one of the widespread paradigmatic thoughts of classical nature philosophy under the “die and wax” code. Today, in times when this has emigrated to ecology, it’s more the harmonious equilibrium, the cyclical movement in abeyance, which does not grow rampant, which cedes the leading example of popular deliberations on “nature in general”. The fact that developments reach boundaries, that they go into reverse and then cause much devastation is a thought that one can hardly today associate with “nature” outside of the academic public, although of course biologists know precisely about these processes. Human population growth that is dangerous for man himself is hardly regarded as a natural process but as the result of deficient human planning. The fact that the forest waxes, yet the burgeoning upper branches take the light from lower plants, that the top strives upwards while below much fades and dies is a banality, but not paradigmatic. The tree in front of the window is quite lovely, until its roots raise the terrace paving and its foliage darkens the rooms inside. Then it must be cut down.

Because we cannot take all our experience of nature as our theme, man must orient himself via paradigms, take one part of nature as an example of the whole. But according to what criteria are these examples chosen? The rampant plants, which take light away from themselves and everything around them, wither and then begin a new cycle of growth and renewed shading. All of which makes the ambivalence of natural processes that are the characteristic background for all our paradigmatic choices obvious to us concerning what makes up nature.

The syllable “phy”, which as “physis” is part of the Greek word for “nature”, stands for the plant process of germinating, growing, sprouting. Nature, the Latin translation of “physis”, on the other hand, refers to the animal process of being born (“nasci”). Both developments, plant growth as well as animal birth, are not volitional. The natural was originally understood as creation that occurs on its own. Not till Christianity was natural creativity understood as the manifestation of a volition: namely divine will. The seed in the dark moisture germinates and the shoot strives towards the light and branches out. Contractions begin and the baby is pressed through the birth canal towards the light. Mother and child must not will anything (even when births are induced or babies removed by caesarean section). At some time or other the copy errors in the genetic material of a cell nucleus increase; at some time or other the joints wear out, the calcification of the arteries become too extensive and an organism perishes. This too is a natural, not a voluntary, process. 100 billion people have died since the Stone Age in this way or (most probably in) other (“violent”) ways. Seven billion exist now. Is this a gratifying or menacing, a natural or unnatural, coming and going? Is this proliferation and contamination or blooming and prospering? From which perspective should we make our evaluation of this way or that? In any case it can hardly be seen otherwise than as a natural occurrence.

The attempt to respond to such questions with declarations is quite pointless. For in the act of pronouncing theories, declarations are notoriously difficult to thematize. Theories strive for contradiction-free, conceptual clarity owing to the argumentative structures that they seek to realize. “Nature” and “natural” and the group of words derived or allied to them are however not only not unequivocal, but are not even defining concepts because their use is not under any regulation. Almost everything today can be defined as natural – or not. They are symbols that we use at

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times in this way and at times in that way, at times associated with this, at times with another, evaluation. Despite which, these words determine thinking. According to the evaluations we associate with them, they do this in a different way. In “nature” either salvation is sought or nature has flown and combats everything that threatens man and undermines his will.

Vis-à-vis theory, it is the great advantage of art to reflect on these ambivalences and make us aware of them. For art has no need to make declarations and is therefore liberated from the unequivocalness of the necessary terminology. Has Sleeping Beauty, by a demonic curse, been banished behind the hedge in a death-like state? Is the greenery around her castle nature or sorcery or is nature at all magical? Does the thorny growth like a natural wall protect her from “inappropriate suitors” or does it cut her off from the world? Is the rampant growth and withering of the plants an unending process of an eternal return, of a coming and going that is the illusion of movement or rather an ongoing, never final, decisive struggle? Are we in animated nature (which is carried out in the rhythms of becoming and fading away) caught up in a temporal illusion that we must break through via pure, timeless mathematical thinking or religious inspiration? Or is nature the realm that brings “us” forth, coddles us, and in the end takes up the “last reality” again? Is humanity a rampant growth on the planet, a layer of mold, a disease from Gaia, the primal mother, or only another of the many kinds that come into being within life’s process and pass away, regenerate rampantly and choke on themselves? The question can only be answered with opinions. Any knowledge beyond opinions lies, on the other hand, in the insight into the ambivalences that underlie these questions. The installation Dornröschen by Gabriela Gerber and Lukas Bardill makes these ambivalences tangible.