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Blooming Flowers, Fish in Water, Amphibians, and Apes: Herder's Environmental Aesthetics of Nature

With regard to Johann Gottfried Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language* and his *Ideas towards a Philosophy of the History of Mankind* recent studies have stressed his crucial role in the pre-history of ecological thought emerging in German Romanticism and Idealism around 1800. In his *Ideas* Herder sought to explain the diversification of cultures as part of the history of nature by means of his theory of climate which allowed to correlate the abundance of organic forms to the variety of cultures since both are developing in accordance with particular environments (cf. Axer). Moreover, he also developed a "proto-ecocritical perspective" (Rigby, "Nature" 33) in his previous *Treatise on the Origin of Language*: As Kate Rigby points out, "Herder traces the origins of language to an act of non-appropriative attentive listening to the animal other, perceived, moreover, as an *alter ego*, a 'thou'", and, thus, gives a "dialogical account of the origins of language" which "implies a mode of ethical comportment proper to the ongoing process of becoming human that is of profound ecological, biosemiotic and religious significance: it is 'an appeal to let the world breathe and resound, and to dialogue with it'" (37). Against that background, I will focus on one of Herder's very latest works, namely on *Kalligone*, published in 1800, that has been left unattended in this context so far. However, this treatise on aesthetics is of utmost importance to the pre-history of ecological thought since it introduces remarkable aspects of that "proto-ecocritical perspective" into the contemporary discourse of philosophical aesthetics, more precisely, into the discussion on natural beauty as it was brought up anew by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* from 1790.

Herder's *Kalligone* (meaning "The Birth of Beauty") is a three-volume polemic, a kind of response quite harshly criticizing the *Critique of Judgment* in form of a loose dialogue, quoting and commenting on Kant's central arguments in order to reject them, prove them wrong and outline another aesthetic theory in the course of that backtalk. Even though to both, Kant and Herder, natural beauty is of paradigmatic significance to explain what beauty is and how aesthetic judging works, their arguments and outcomes, however, differ radically. Objecting to Kant's transcendental approach, Herder accounts for aesthetic experience both ontologically and theologically,

engaging a neo-Spinozan view of nature. In doing so, he drafts a theory of natural beauty (and ugliness) that may be considered as environmental. He determines the beauty of natural beings in respect to their environment, i.e., the particular “element” (air, water, earth) they live in, and develops an aesthetic semiotics of (perfect) form, of environmental “wellbeing,” which not only accounts for the agential properties of matter itself and, thus, for an autopoietic process of becoming form, but also for a kind of empathizing human comprehension of this “natural alphabet”¹ (122) of “living figures” (52): Considering natural beauties as “embodiments of properties and perfections of their particular element” (83), Herder argues that they are “signed with the living concept of their element” (79), and defines natural beauty as “the living expression of a creature’s wellbeing, each in its element, if the human being’s senses feel that expression harmonious to themselves” (140).

Antecedent: Kant’s Flower or What is a Free Beauty?

In his *Critique of Judgment* Kant precisely distinguished the aesthetic judgment from the cognitive as well as from the judgment on the good and, therefore, objected the prevalent aesthetics of perfection with its claim of a unity of the true, good and beautiful. He famously argued that the beautiful is liked “devoid of all interest” in or desire for the object (53; § 5), that it is judged “without a concept” of the object but nonetheless “liked universally” (64; § 9), and that it is “an object’s form of purposiveness” which is, though, being “perceived ... without the presentation of a purpose” (84; § 17). This implies that a judgment of taste is both independent of any sensual charms and emotions as well as of any concept determining the object’s purpose and perfection. Kant’s contemporarily somewhat provocative thesis is that beauty—in its proper or “pure” sense—has nothing to do with knowledge, least of all with the concept of perfection: Calling something *beautiful* tells precisely nothing about this thing itself but only about the aesthetic pleasure of the judging subject (which is, though, claimed to be universally shareable with other subjects). However, Kant differentiates “two kinds of beauty,” namely, “free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*)” and “merely accessory [*anhängende*] beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*)” (76; § 16).² The judgment on the latter is not purely aesthetical but regulated by notions of perfection since it “presuppose[s] a

¹ Here and in the following, all translations of Herder’s *Kalligone* from the German are my own.

² Cf. the German original, Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* 146-49 (§ 16, B 49-53).

concept of what the object is meant to be ..., as well as the object's perfection in terms of that concept" (76; § 16). For instance, Kant explicates, the judgment on "the beauty of a human being ... or of a building (such as a church, palace, armory or summer-house)" depends on the knowledge of or respect for the object's purpose, hence, sticks to "a concept of its perfection, and so it is merely adherent beauty" (77; § 16). In contrast, a vague or "free beauty" can be judged purely by taste: It "does not presuppose a concept of what the object is meant to be" but is the "self-subsistent beauty of this or that thing" (76; § 16). To begin with, Kant presents "natural beauties"—first of all "flowers"—as exemplary objects of a "pure" judgment of taste: He explains that "hardly anyone apart from the botanist knows what sort of thing a flower is meant to be; and even he, while recognizing it as the reproductive organ of a plant, pays no attention to this natural purpose when he judges the flower by taste" (76; § 16). Indeed, everything about the flower seems *as if* organized in respect to a purpose; yet despite this directionality to a goal, the end—i.e. the flower's "natural purpose" and the perfection of its organism in terms of that—is not at all taken into account when finding the flower beautiful. Rather, one has precisely to desist from any concept determining "what sort of thing a flower is meant to be" because this "would only restrict" the "free play" of the mental powers understanding and imagination—which is, according to Kant, constitutive of aesthetic pleasure resp. "liking" [*Wohlgefallen*] in its proper sense—and, hence, would "impair" or even derogate [Kant says "Abbruch tun"³] "the purity" of the aesthetic judgment (77; § 16). To put it short, only an aesthetical view on the flower, that is, a point of view of non-knowledge enables this "free play": Kant argues that "our imagination is playing, as it were, while it contemplates the shape" of the flower, its "mere form" (77; § 16). This, hence, provokes the special pleasure in the beautiful, its concept-less and "disinterested" liking, i.e., the subject's contemplative enjoyment of a pure *as if*, literally cut loose from any code, free from any determining concept and ruling model of perfection that would otherwise regulate and, hence, "impurify" the judgment. So the flower is such beautiful only because it has no semantics but opens up a free play to productive imagination. Likewise, Kant adds, "(m)any birds and a lot of crustaceans in the sea," and, similarly, also "designs à la grecque, the foliage on borders or on wallpapers, etc., mean nothing on their own: they represent nothing", as well as "music without a topic, indeed all music not set to words [*ohne Text*]" (76-77; § 16).

³ Cf. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* 147, (§ 16, B 50-51).

Herder's Objection: Human Pleasure in the Blooming Flower

In *Kalligone* Herder accuses this account of aesthetic pleasure and pure beauty to be downright “contrary to the experience of everyone” (105). Rejecting Kant’s distinction of “free beauty” and “merely accessory beauty,” he denies that there even can be something like a sensation of “free beauty,” which is why he regards an aesthetic judgment operating without concepts as basically an untenable illusion, as just “speaking in a dream” (103). He claims that Kant’s definitions rather “fail to meet the nature of beauty and lead astray in broad ways” (39) since he set the basis of aesthetic pleasure in a merely “transcendent, super-sensuous substrate of mankind” (30), and turned the realm of beauty into “an illusory world without concept and purpose” where one merely “feels a *quasi-nothing* in everything pleasant” (52). Against this, Herder counters that “what is to be felt must be *something*, i.e., a substantiality [*Bestandtheit*], an essence [*Wesen*] expressing itself to us; hence something true lies at the ground of everything that is pleasant or unpleasant to us” (52). Therefore, he not only stresses the concrete role of the senses, and, thus, of the body in aesthetic experience but also asserts an ontological significance of pleasure and displeasure. Essentially interlinked with that, he moreover asserts a semiotics of (perfect) form in nature as well as in art and artificial (re-)creation, hence insisting that “without concepts and the notion of a purpose the words *beautiful* and *beauty* are never in place” (88). Contradicting Kant, Herder seeks to demonstrate that this circumstance does not only become apparent when considering a building or, the more so, a human being but initially precisely in respect to natural beauties other than human—which, hence, *Kalligone*’s first part deals with primarily.

Herder starts his backtalk with the argument that aesthetic pleasure is not a “cold *liking*” (36), thus, in no way “disinterested” but rather of most fundamental interest since it is intimately connected with the interest we take in life itself, in our being and well-being, and, moreover, in the existential state and condition of other beings in relation to ourselves. Stating that “the inmost-pleasant is my living felt existence itself,” he argues: “the pleasant does not merely *gratify*; rather, the inmost-pleasant expands, empowers, strengthens my being” (30). Nota bene, Herder derives the meaning of “pleasant” from “angenehm,” agreeable, stating that “*pleasant* is what each or any of our senses gladly *agrees* to [*annimmt*], what is *acceptable* [*genehm*], i.e., *appropriate* [*angemessen*] to it, what it *approves* [*genehmigt*] when perceiving” (27). He explicates that every affection by an object implements a process of internalization in which the perceiving subject appropriates what is agreeable

to it, and repels what is adverse: “What, according to how I am organized, is frightening, offending or hostile to the feeling of my being, is unpleasant; in contrast, what preserves, promotes, expands my being, in short, whatever is *harmonious* with it, that is gladly accepted and appropriated by each of my senses, finding it pleasant” (30). So pleasant is what gives me a feeling of liberation and strength, of not merely being alive but of living freely, strongly and joyfully, that is, as Herder terms it, a feeling of “*wellbeing* [*Wohlsein*” (31). Moreover, he actually grasps “wellbeing” as the goal of life itself, and, hence, as universally pleasant to all living beings: “*Wellbeing*, welfare, health” are “the foundation of and purpose to the existence of every living being.... We all desire wellbeing, and whatever promotes this wellbeing in any way is pleasant” (31). Based on this, Herder with the term “wellbeing” not only addresses the pleasant feeling of living healthy, strongly and joyfully but, likewise, a being’s bodily perfection in adaption to its particular environment or “element” that conditions its maximum potential of being. He argues that the pleasure we take in the beautiful of nature precisely applies to our sensed or felt recognition of a creature’s “wellbeing” in terms of its perfect form and motion which emerges in an environmental dynamics. Therefore, this determination of beauty as a felt yet objective perfection cannot be diagnosed as a mere throwback to the aesthetics of perfection rejected by Kant. To Herder the sensation of a “living figure’s” beauty offers a recognition of the essence and order of things, and that is, of nature as a harmonic, yet not static but developmental unity of dynamically interacting physical forces in which he recognizes the ultimately divine “*One spirit of life*” (117)—that also manifests in the “spirit” of each particular “element”. As it indicates here, in his theory of natural beauty Herder actually readopts the neo-Spinozan view of nature he had already engaged in some former writings, that is, “an understanding of mind and matter, God and Nature as indivisible, albeit distinct, manifestations of the one universal substance” which, however, “reconceives the divine as an active and mind-like ‘primal force’ that is manifest in all creation” (Rigby, “Earth’s Poesy” 54). Whereas Spinoza “understood God as an active but unchanging ‘substance,’” Herder in his renovation stresses the “dynamically agentic properties of matter itself” and, thus, “redefine[s] the divine substance as an active ‘force’ (*Kraft*), animating and directing from within a ‘system’ of biophysical or ‘organic’ forces. These interactive forces materialise the underlying unity of nature and account for its developmental character,” which Herder thinks of as an “*autopoietic process*” (Rigby, “Nature” 35).

Hence, objecting Kant's theory of aesthetic pleasure as a concept-less, non-semiotic "free play" of mental powers when contemplating the mere shape of an object like the flower, Herder counters: "Not any line, not any shape and contour in nature is an arbitrary [*willkürliches*] play; on bodies it is ... the real expression of *their essence, their being*, composed from *solidity* and from *forces*, in respect to rest and motion" (48). He states that "the realm of organizations is ruled by the elements": "[T]hese command and give form, i.e., they limit the organizing spirit ruling in a particular element so that every build [*Gebilde*] has to be considered an embodiment of efficiencies [*Wirksamkeiten*] and perceptibilities [*Fühlbarkeiten*] that took place in this element according to place and time" (88). Suggesting that "one can think of the body as received in the wrangle of the elements, after they have singled peacefully and defined in curves," he regards the body as the result of several inner and outer effective forces and counteractions coming from the discomposure of chaos to a harmonically balanced "whole which this body is meant to be" (47). He argues that "the *being* or *substantiality* [*Bestandheit*] of a thing is based on its *effective forces in harmony* [*im Eben- und Gleichmaß*], thus, on its *limitation*. Motion and rest constitute a maximum to it, and for multiple limbs or regards several maxima, exponents of its substance [*Bestand*]"—and "this configuration to a lasting whole" is "the self-substantiality [*Selbstbestandheit*], i.e. the wellbeing of a thing" (52). Reasoning, moreover, that "for all living figures there is a maximum of their being, a point of their perfection," he states that "the sensuous perception of this maximum in all means and forces striving to that effect is the feeling of a thing's perfection, its beauty" (52). Hence, Herder first determines natural beauty as "the incarnate expression of a bodily perfection, harmonic both in itself as to our feeling" (51). Based on this, he then drafts a semiotics of environmental "wellbeing," arguing that "every living creature, according to its shape and figure, incorporates a maximum of its significance, and the appreciation of this, rationally or sensually, gives us the concept of its beauty, i.e., of wellbeing in its particular element" (85).

Significantly, the first creature Herder brings on to exemplify his theory of natural beauty is, in fact, a flower too. Yet whereas Kant presented it as the most exemplary object of a pure judgment of taste in order to show that any knowledge of the flower in terms of its conceptual recognition as "the reproductive organ of a plant" sets an end to purely aesthetic pleasure, Herder seeks to demonstrate the opposite, turning the flower into a kind of counterexample against that argument. He finds the flower beautiful *because* of her blooming, in which he sees "*the full appearance of her wellbeing*" (77), the "embodiment [*Inbegriff*]" of her essence. In doing so, Herder's view on the

flower seems, indeed, somewhat botanically or horticulturally informed but, nonetheless, noticeably differs from that of Kant's botanist. In contrast to the latter, Herder empathically embraces the "lovely" flower in her "delicate figure," addressing her in an ode-like tone as a living counterpart, a "you" or *alter ego*, stressing her powers of reproducing in human terms of love and motherliness, thus, outlining a decisively different concept of the flower:

Welcome, dulcet flower! an image of beauty and too soon overblown loveliness to all nations. Unseen, your roots strike in the soil, seeking earthly nourishment; yet thyself, delicate living figure, springing up and gently curved, you breathe the air, suck the light, sprouting leaves and buds. The higher up, the more refined; until finally you show with gathered power what you are, what you are able to do. There is the crown of thy life, thy work, the *blossom*, bridal chamber of love, a site of breeding, custody and nourishment to the young plant. To her, the verdant mother sacrifices all her power; at the peak of these motherly drives she herself shows in full *beauty*, i.e. in virtue of all her powers, behind which she wilts and recedes by and by. Nature, then, preserves her tender birth inconsiderable, indeed, yet firmly enclosed and well-arranged. She has accomplished her function [*Am!*]. (77)

Concluding his exemplary account of aesthetic experience of the flower, Herder stresses his point: "If humans rejoice in the flower, it is because their organs accord with the form and impact of this lovely being.... The bloom of the flower is always beautiful, *the full appearance of her wellbeing, of her powers representing her*. The beauty of the flower is the maximum of her peculiar being and wellbeing; she is beautiful to us, if our feeling may harmonically appropriate [*sich zueignen*] that maximum and gladly does" (77-78). One does not need to be a botanist right away to have a concept of the flower—though, for Herder, such scientific knowledge would actually not hinder the pleasant sensation of her beauty at all. However, his presentation of the flower is determined to show that it is rather about another kind of knowledge: Aesthetic experience offers a special access to the world since it renders a kind of translation of the material realm of bodies into something we can grasp and understand in concepts—yet in "sensuous concepts" (cf. 88). To Herder, in aesthetic experience of natural beauty a system or harmonic unity of dynamically interacting forces and powers (of divine provenance) manifests. Initially, this concerns the flower as a "living figure" and, moreover, also an understanding of nature as a harmonic whole in which all creatures, including humans, are embedded and related to each other as well as to their environment in virtue of their bodies and feelings. In the example Herder first stresses the flower's environmental powers of "wellbeing," picturing an agential, actively rooting, sprouting, growing, blooming

and life-giving animated being developing and forming in dynamical relation to her environment—“striking in the soil,” “sucking light,” and “breathing air.” Altogether, he tells a climactic and self-contained miniature-narrative of the flower’s complete life or, if one may say so, of her ontogenesis as an earthly organism becoming perfect form in terms of an autopoietic process. According to this, so to speak, holistic concept of the flower, her blooming appears as the culmination of her “wellbeing,” thus, the perfection of the goal or purpose of her being, harmonically embedded in the encompassing, ultimately divine context of life itself. Furthermore, Herder argues that through the medium of feeling—understood as the (originally tactile but also in vision and hearing engaged) sense for the recognition of concrete bodies—the human is able to grasp the flower’s “living figure” in a kind of empathizing way, enjoying her perfect “wellbeing” by means of that sensuous “accord with the form and impact of this lovely being.” Hence, the experience of natural beauty is—to a certain extent—a matter of empathizing with a creature’s “wellbeing” in terms of its perfect form and motion. This sensed or felt recognition of its “essence,” indeed, implies a proto-biosemiotic dimension: To begin with, Herder argues that “the entire moved nature talks to harmonic beings” through “sound or tone,” grasped “as the voice of all moved bodies, out of their inside,” reasoning, hence, that “there can be no doubt about our co-recognition [*Mitverstehen*], our co-feeling [*Mitempfindung*] with the voice and the gestures of living fellow creatures” (63) since “(e)very co-feeling animal understands these” (64). Later on Herder expands this point by stating that all beings in virtue of their shape and build, figure and motion “talk out of *their* world, out of their elements” (81). Nonetheless, at the same time Herder also stresses the necessarily anthropocentric perspective of this understanding “listening” and, thus, also of the aesthetic semiotics of “wellbeing,” pointing out that “it is always him, the human, talking to them”: “In the name of all he holds that dialogue; setting himself, as far as he can, in every nature” (81). Therefore, in “our” aesthetic experience of other living beings and, thus, with our concepts of their beauty it is rather about feeling and recognizing ourselves in the non-human other(s). The better we manage to do so, the more beautiful we find them. In fact, Herder in his exemplary account of the flower makes some rhetoric, if not to say, poetic effort to spell out the human’s concept of her, empathically grasping the flower as a “you” in terms of an *alter ego*, describing the blossom as a “bridal chamber of love,” moreover enduing the “verdant mother” with further human passions and businesses. Finally, Herder himself points out the appropriative character of that concept when stating: The flower “is

beautiful to us, if our feeling may harmonically appropriate that maximum and gladly does". Not by chance he already introduced the flower as "an image of beauty and too soon overblown loveliness to all nations". This gets even clearer when he claims directly subsequent to the example: "Even the most common sense understands this language of nature [*Natursprache*] since it is the thing itself.... All nations on earth know this language and use its images" (78). To demonstrate his point, he continues: "To whom youth compares herself most favorite? In which life she sees her own fortune? What does the girdle of flowers mean to the virgin? The similar graces herself with the likes of her," and, "likewise, the youngling feels himself in the aspiring tree" (78). Moreover, Herder claims that "all primitive people [*Naturvölker*] mourn their son's death in that image" (78). As Herder already invoked prevalent human codes and images of female ages—from the bride to the mother—in the flower's stages of development, he as well sees all ages of a man—from the young to the "very aged man"—in each of the tree's figures, picturing that "mature man gives shade and inclines his fruit-branches by and by" (78). Therefore, the "significance of living figures" (74) from which Herder derives the concept of each particular natural beauty shows as basically related to and embedded in (and, thus, also regulated and formatted by) cultural codes and discourses, especially the ones of myth, literature, and all arts in general, as well as cultural techniques—which, in turn, are inspired by nature.

This moreover shows when Herder, subsequent to the earthly figures of flower and tree, invites his readers to "descend to the watery realm of Neptune", now investigating the beauty that "inhabits this element" (79). Once more, whereas Kant considered the "crustaceans in the sea" as conceptless, non-semiotic "free beauties," Herder, in contrast, sees them lined with letters overall—which he ultimately identifies as the "*true nomenclature* of the Creator on his creatures, imprinted to matter through *true, selected lineaments*, ... the pledge of *godly truth*" (122): Herder does not only assert that "corals and pearls," and "armored forms" are "signed with the living concept of their regional substantiality [*Bestandheit*]", i.e., their "element" (79), but, moreover, presents the fish in the water as the best example of perfect form in this element. In doing so, Herder outlines the human's concept of the fish by means of a cultural technique:

All beautiful figures of the sea seem to us freely and happily built ... for living in *their* element. As living vessels, as *swimmers* they appear to us, where ship and skipper are one, floating through the waves.... The fish floats and rocks on its sea-wings, shoots down and drives up, and sweeps and pilots. An unattainable

model of living shipbuilding's craft. Observing ... his delicate structure at the inside, at the outside, on so many species, the glossy, artful flakes and colors: so he seems to us, what he really is, a living representation of the silver sea itself, that not just has reflected [*abgespiegelt*] but has *embodied* in him, and, if one may say so, has *turned* into a feeling of itself. (80)

Considering the fish in the water, Herder explicitly terms natural beauty for the first time as the “embodiment” [*Inbegriff*] of an animal's natural environment—i.e., here: the sea, whose concept, apparently, can be grasped by humans only through recognition of the fish's perfect shape and motion. In other words: The fish tells “us” the meaning of *sea*. And, in turn, the sea gains a kind of consciousness or self-feeling as it embodies itself in the fish. Thereby, Herder designs a kind of metonymical relation between animal and environment since the fish is part of the sea and at the same time its signifier. Nevertheless, since Herder primarily captures the fish as “a living vessel,” as “ship and skipper (in) one,” an “unattainable model of living shipbuilding's craft,” it becomes clear that the human being gets his concepts of things in nature not only by means of an empathizing view or attentive “listening” to them but, in doing so, through his appropriative (re-)creation of them. Actually, Herder later on explicates that it is “the essential rule of our (human) nature to create *configurations* out of everything that we experience and feel, i.e., to think only by means of *creation* [*Gestaltung*]: What the human being “thinks out of [*herausdenkt*] the pickings of his senses and impressions [*aus der Beute seiner Sinne und Eindrücke*] are *configurations*. He always is, good or bad, an artist” (119). In terms of that, Herder's aesthetics of nature may be considered as both a semiotics and a poetics of environmental “wellbeing,” of perfect form.

As an artist—that he is due to his own “nature” or rather essential determination as “nature's most gifted *work of art* [*Kunstprodukt*]” (127)—a human being imitates nature artistically and technically. According to Herder, “beauty in art [*Kunstschönheit*] is a humanly modeled imprint of beauty in nature [*Naturschönheit*]” (140)—though not in a merely copying sense. Rather, this mimesis is an appliance of the “omnipotent rule of natural beauty [*des Naturschönen*] as a maximum limiting itself in between two extremes” (72), thus, of the dynamics of interacting forces which the human being acquires in the “teaching school [*Lehrschule*]” (54) of nature's beautiful figures. And through “*Gestaltung*,” through (re-)creation, Herder states, “the human being creates himself, i.e., he recognizes and uses that rule” (118). Thus, the human being is determined by nature to be both his own creator and creature at once: “(O)nly through art he became what he is,” and “as a human, art is natural

to him" (140). However, the human can realize his determination as that being who creates himself through culture only in interrelation, exchange and intercommunion with nature: "He lives in nature, built harmonic to her, and has to live with her. Hence, the history of his culture in appreciation and exercise of the beautiful is both natural and artificial [*Natur- und KunstmäÙsig* (sic)]" (140). As the human being in his arts and actions uses nature to his own purposes in the ongoing process of becoming human, Herder finally calls him on to do this right, and that means *tastefully*: Whereas "nobody can deny that nature gets depredated and mangled through tastelessness of humans," they are rather assigned "to improve and embellish nature in virtue of reason and assiduity, i.e., to bring her to a harmony and perfection that she, left to herself, never would reach" (314). Thus, as Herder's aesthetics of nature basically implies a dimension of educating taste in order to educate and cultivate the human individual as well as mankind to become what it "truly" is, this aesthetics, at the same time, also implies a bio-governmental cast.

Herder actually considers the human being as determined by "Mother Nature" to be "the ruler of the world" (128). As the prideful "last-born of the Creation" (128), the human being is also granted an aesthetically prior, indeed, a paradigmatic or ideal position. Herder regards the human as the telos of all natural figures, hence at the top of the chain of beings. However, Herder drafts an aesthetically oriented, environmentally informed, developmental, and rather organological interpretation of the *scala naturae*. Arguing that all creatures cohabit "one common world" which is "ruled by *One* spirit of life" and "disposed" for both the "enjoyment of life in a particular element" and "for common wellbeing," he assumes an "universal analogy," "one common type [*Gesamt-Typus*]" (117) continuously connecting all living beings which, again, have to be understood as elementally conditioned variations of that type. Herder claims that this "common type" "ascended according to elements and regions": from "the swimming creature" with its "horizontal figure," to the "bird, flying in its element, gaining a freer build", finally coming up to the "erected figure" of the human (117). In a certain sense, the human being comprises that "universal analogy" of natural builds in his own figure, giving him a repertoire of forms to compare and find again in his fellow creatures. In fact, Herder claims the human being to be "the evaluator of the world, judge of its shapeliness and beauty" (88). Moreover, he treats the human being's own figure precisely as the "measurement and model of organic beauty" to judge all elementally varying natural beauties, claiming that "in the human all of his forms are significant" (90). Therefore,

Herder orients his aesthetics of nature “only according to *human* concepts and feelings”: “We do not talk about feeling beings of another kind, and it is a double foolishness to dream oneself into such unknown worlds” (116). Hence, finding something beautiful means, basically, that this thing is completely “clear and comprehensible to *us*,” i.e., to humans (77). This fundamentally anthropocentric character of Herder’s aesthetical semiotics of elemental “wellbeing” is of particular relevance when he deals with ugliness in nature.

Ugliness: Amphibians, Apes—and Kant

Whereas Herder judged blooming flower and fish in the water as beautiful because humans can enjoy and grasp these figures as harmonious perfect wholes, each being “signed with the living concept” of their sheer elements, he argues that ugly animals occur at the “changeovers [*Übergänge*] of two realms of nature” (79). While he admits that these animals are, too, “built for their elements like with a compass at hand” (whereby he implicitly invokes the phenomenon of magnetism, thus, stressing again the agential properties of matter itself as well as the human recognition of that in physical sciences), he asserts that they nonetheless “appear obnoxious to us”: “ugly and strange at first sight” (79). When having “a closer look at them and accustoming to their looks,” one could, indeed, notice that they are likewise “most gently and harmonically accorded to the twofold element” (79). Yet he asserts that they are, nevertheless, ambivalent and “disharmonious to our feeling” since “our eye can hardly reconcile with their figure” (80). That is because the eye, according to Herder, “sees in every unit the unity, a whole,” and “constituting a unity is the very business of the visual sense” in such a way that “a world of indestructibly-lightish harmony and order appears in front of us [*vor uns tritt*]” (58). While “the human sets himself, as far as he can, in every nature”, in regard to the elemental changeovers, he apparently cannot, thus, seems handicapped here: Herder explains that these animals do not appear to “us” as perfectly comprehensible representations of their “wellbeing” for they seem rather dubious “*Doppelartige*” from a human perspective—adverse mixtures, in which, for instance, “earth and sea are mixed up” (79). Therefore, Herder explicates, they arouse distaste. To demonstrate this, he brings on “the figure of the amphibian” as the best example of these ugly “*Doppelartige*,” counting on his reader’s agreement. In this figure, Herder insists, “builds [*Gebilde*] of two elements, the land- and the

sea-animal, quasi adverse, intertwine. Head and chest a creature of the earth yet dragging limbs of the sea” (80). Unlike the preceding examples, Herder does not try to evoke his reader’s empathy here, i.e., our “co-recognition” and “co-feeling” with the amphibian by a narration as in case of the flower. Instead, he implicitly invokes a well-known topos of an ugly image as ancient poetics has it, namely, the mixed up mermaidly figure by means of which Horace in his *Ars Poetica* normatively illustrated a mimetically improper and, thus, ridiculously null creation:

What if a Painter, in his art to shine,
A human head and horse’s neck should join;
From various creatures put the limbs together,
Cover’d with plumes, from ev’ry bird a feather;
And in a filthy tail the figure drop,
A fish at bottom, a fair maid at top:
Viewing a picture of this strange condition,
Would you not laugh at such an exhibition? (1)

So the Herderian-human view on nature is not “free” but, rather, a priori formatted and normed by a certain passed down poetics and in the end somewhat conservative rules and notions of wholeness, unity and perfection preferred to or regarded as higher than other aesthetic forms and structures. In turn, Herder thereby also naturalizes normative rules of poetics as well as prevalent cultural codes and semiotics (as already seen in the bridal flower and the manly tree).

Concluding his statements on ugliness in nature, however, Herder realizes a further error of the human aesthetic judgment. Asserting that especially those animals who “are most similar to us” are ultimately “the ugliest,” he explicates that this “very resemblance is beguiling; it corrupts, or, as we have already noticed in regard to other border-neighbors [*Grenznachbarn*], fools our judgment,” although “it should not”: “As cohabitants of one earth we may put us in the place of every of our relatives”; but, nonetheless, “our judgment on the animals of the earth becomes the more biased, the closer they live” (84). To demonstrate this, he brings on “the ape and the sloth” as “the very ugliest animals,” explaining that “they do not appear to us as what they are, but rather as a brute, distorted shape of man. We hate and regret the big sad ape, that *seria bestia* of our new cynical philosophers; and nobody looks without shame and disgust at the libidinous, lush [*iüppigen*] ape” (84). In doing so, however, Herder cannot forgo a further polemic remark directed at Kant. In fact, he makes an ape out of his former teacher here, moreover

presenting Kant's sensation of "free beauty" as a silly ape's game—while, at the same time, stating that aping is a bad, deficient and ugly form of mimesis in comparison to that of the human: "Silently, one speaks to oneself: how similar is the ape to some of mankind! Does not even the rudiment of that what makes the human a creature of art, the imitative instinct, lie in front of us in the ape? This aping play, without concept and purpose but purposive to all appearances, where does it become clearer to us than in the apes?" (84). Finally, it seems kind of ironic that Herder uses, of all things, the ape to revile Kant—for at the same time the ape functions here precisely as a figure of reflection by means of which Herder points out the "corruption" and deception caused by that "beguiling resemblance" to the human himself and, moreover, also by "additional notions [*Nebenideen*]," thus, by certain concepts that tend to "black-out" the aesthetic judgment (89). Yet—properly understood—that was all what Kant meant when speaking about "adherent beauty" with regard to which aesthetic judging is not "free" but regulated because it is sticking to or depending on concepts and codes of perfection which are essentially normative. Hence, when considering ugliness, Herder's aesthetics of nature in the end inadvertently converges to the statements of his archenemy Kant on "adherent beauty."

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