
NATURAL HISTORY:
REFLECTIONS ON ITS
REPRESENTATION
IN THE TWENTIETH
CENTURY MUSEUM

David Kleinberg - Levin *

“Nature is the first, or old, Testament, since things are still outside the center and therefore under the law. Man is the beginning of the new covenant through whom, as mediator, since he himself is connected with God, God accepts nature [. . .]. Man is thus the redeemer of nature towards whom all its archetypes strive. [But] the Word that is fulfilled in man exists in nature as a dark, prophetic (still incompletely spoken) Word. [...] [For] Man never gains control over the condition [that organizes the world], even though in evil he strives to do so. [The words that Man brings to the naming of nature have, however, only a weak redemptive potency.] Hence the veil of sadness which is spread over the whole of nature, the deep, unappeasable melancholy of all life.” Friedrich Schelling, *Treatise of Human Freedom*.¹

“The life of Man in pure language-mind was blissful. Nature, however, was mute. True, it can be clearly felt in the second chapter of Genesis how this muteness, named by Man, itself became bliss, only of lower degree. [After he has named the animals, Adam sees them leap away from him with joy.] But after the Fall, when God’s word curses the ground, the appearance of nature is deeply changed. Now begins its other muteness, which we mean the deep sadness of nature. It is a metaphysical truth that all of nature would begin to lament if it were endowed with language. [. . .] This proposition has a double meaning. It means, first: she would lament language itself. Speechlessness: that is the great sorrow of nature (and for the sake of her redemption the life and language of Man—not only, as is supposed, of the poet—are in nature). This proposition means, secondly: she would lament. Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent expression of language; [. . .] and even where there

* Professor Emeritus, Northwestern University

¹ Schelling, F. W. J. (1936), *Treatise on Human Freedom*. Chicago: Open Court, pp. 92, 79. Translation modified.

is only a rustling of plants, in it there is always a lament. Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature: the sadness of nature makes her mute.” Walter Benjamin, “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”²

“History is written across the countenance of nature in the sign language of transience. [. . .] In nature, the allegorical poets [of the German Baroque] saw eternal transience, and here alone the saturnine vision of these generations recognized history.” Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*³

“Whereas in the symbol, with the glorification of death and destruction, the transfigured face of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of redemption, in allegory, the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history, a petrified, primordial landscape.” Ibid.⁴

“[But ‘second nature’, the artificial world of convention taking up what ‘first’ nature has provided, is also, and in fact even more than ‘first’ nature,] a petrified, estranged complex of meaning that is no longer able to awaken inwardness; it is a charnel house of rotted interiorities.” Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*⁵

§1

I would like to offer some modest reflections on the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, founded in 1869 as an institution that shows us and tells us not only about ourselves as “rational animals” and about our relationship to the natural world, but also, through that relationship to nature, something important about our moral relationship to one another. This museum has played a significant role in my life—especially during the formative years of my child-

² Benjamin, W. (1986), “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” In: *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 328–29.

³ Benjamin, W. (1998), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso, New Left Books, pp. 177, 179. The title in English is egregiously misleading, because the whole point of that work is to distinguish between tragedy and *Trauerspiel*; thus, its claim to originality consists in a refined analysis of the *Trauerspiel* as a distinct theatrical genre during the German Baroque.

⁴ Ibid., p. 166.

⁵ Lukács, G. (1978), *The Theory of the Novel*. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 54.

hood, when I lived near enough to the Museum to visit it almost every weekend, passing many exhilarating hours in its awesome halls of exhibition. In the earliest years of my visits, what never ceased to enthrall me were the gigantic dinosaur skeletons, mounted in life-like poses, and the no less gigantic whale, floating in the air high above me. In somewhat later years, I found enjoyment in learning from the exhibitions that showed the smaller animals—fearsome animals, such as bears and snakes, strange animals, such as anteaters and armadillos, lovable animals, such as otters, chipmunks, deer, wolves and beavers, impressive animals of the skies, such as eagles and hawks—placed with a marvelous approximation to realism, as if living happily, despite their uncanny immobility, in their “natural” habitats. Still later, developing a passionate research interest in geology, paleontology, and archaeology, the preeminent sciences of natural history, I concentrated on the halls that contained dazzling displays of minerals and the petrified traces and remains of prehistoric life. And of course I became a knowledgeable collector of fossils and minerals, searching for additions wherever discoveries seemed promising. I also developed, around the same time, a serious interest in the Lepidoptera, attracted to their glorious beauty, and, for a while, I hunted and collected them, capturing some of the butterflies that frequented the family’s gardens, not slighting the furry moths that I found near the lights where they ended their fatefully brief lives. Among others in my collection, around which I invented a network of fables and allegories, I had, neatly pinned, the Monarch, the Yellow Swallowtail, the Black Swallowtail, the Common Buckeye, the Brown Fritillary, and the ephemeral and exquisitely beautiful Luna Moth, once a spectral presence haunting the moonlit nights of summer, but now hovering near extinction in the New England States. But I ceased to collect these magnificent creatures when I could no longer bear watching their agonizing deaths and realized that they had lost as corpses the mesmerizing, spectral beauty I saw in their energetic lives, dancing and fluttering in the currents of summer air.⁶

⁶ See my discussion of the implications of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language for the question of our responsibility to care for nature, in: Kleinberg-Levin, D. (2008), *Before the Voice of Reason: Echoes of Responsibility in Merleau-Ponty’s Ecology and Levinas’s Ethics*. Albany: State University of New York Press. Also see my four chapters on Hölderlin, Marx, Benja-

Returning to the Museum after a half century away from its proximity, I was profoundly shocked by the momentous changes that had taken place there: really startling changes, not only in regard to what had been selected for “permanent” exhibition and what was no longer to be seen, but also in regard to the “character” of the exhibitions, the ways in which all our contemporary political and cultural sensitivities had been ever so carefully and cautiously—and, I suspect, with some anxiety—taken into account. So as I began to contemplate these changes, I realized that they reflected a half-century of changes in the very concept of natural history, changes culminating in the way in which we of today conceptualize and relate to natural history, hence also how we understand ourselves as a distinct species of life and as a species in relation to the rest of the natural world. Although my first reaction was, not surprisingly, nostalgia—a wistful sense that something precious had been abandoned to oblivion,—as the enlightened voice of reason began to make itself heard, I gradually welcomed the changes. But at the same time, I believe that those among us who remember the old Museum with its painstakingly ordered exhibits of “rational” taxonomy have a responsibility to rescue its history from the oblivion that is an all too common fate these days.

Ernst Haeckel’s book, *Kunstformen der Natur* (1900), with its marvelous coloured illustrations, still evokes for me an enchanted realm of nature: that book exemplifies an historically significant way of experiencing nature that we should not exclude and forget in our embrace of the new techniques and forms of knowledge which a “more enlightened” science can deliver. We still need to know—to experience—that enchantment. The natural history museum is one of those singularly favoured places where enchantment and disenchantment could in principle exist in a lively dialectic of reciprocal enrichment.

So what I would like, accordingly, to reflect on in this essay are some of the differences that constitute this conceptual shift—a shift signifi-

min and Heidegger in: Kleinberg-Levin, D. (2005), *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin’s Question of Measure After Heidegger*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; and see my two chapter discussions of Descartes and Heidegger in: Kleinberg-Levin, D. (1999), *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment*. University of California Press; revised paperback edition: (2003), Duquesne University Press.

cant enough, I should suggest, to warrant being called a “paradigm shift”.

§2

The most striking change, I would say, is in the representation of human life as a matter of natural history in its relation to the realm of nature. For the truth is that, despite all the stuffed animals, fossils, minerals, and skeletons, despite all the exhibitions of animal and plant life, in the final analysis, the Museum exists as an historical monument to a seemingly persistent, forever unsettled problematic, a forever controversial answer to the forever renewed anthropological question that defines the modern world: “What is Man?” And, consequently, also, the question “What is Man in relation to nature?” or, in other words: “What is Man as a being that inhabits, and belongs to, the realm of animal nature?”⁷ Thus, I think we must recognize that, insofar as it is conscious of its mission, the Museum is an institution that registers our anthropological self-understanding at a specific historico-cultural moment. In fact, what it presents reveals far more about us than it does about the minerals, plants and bestiary that clamour for our attention and entertain, if not also inspire, our young children. My childhood consciousness of this anthropological intention was however obscured by my fascination with a realm of nature supposed to be separate and apart, not autonomous like the realm in which I and the other recognizably human beings dwelled. But who are we? What kind of natural being are we? And how should we inherit and bequeath the realm of nature in which we live and on which we depend?

In the second of Kant’s three critiques, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the philosopher poses three questions he wants to address: “What can I know?” “What ought I to do?” and “What would it be reasonable for me to hope for?” In his *Logic*, however, he asks a fourth question: “What is Man?” If, though, ones reads his *Anthropology* with that ques-

⁷ See Edmund Husserl’s exploratory reflections on nature, animality, human nature, and the human embodiment, in: Husserl, E. (1952), *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (ed. Marly Biemel). Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, Book II.

tion in mind, one will be disappointed to find what today must be recognized as culturally bound, culturally prejudiced reflections failing his own moral test of universalizability, failing the great eighteenth century project of Enlightenment. But, as Aristotle's definition of the human as a rational animal, or an animal endowed with the gift of language, implicitly reveals, the enigmatic intersection of human nature and nature has always been the subject, since time immemorial, of heated controversy. Besides scholarly debates about geological dates, classificatory systems, taxonomies, origins, genealogies, and evolutionary patterns, New York's Museum of Natural History, like the natural history museums of Western Europe, has been at the very centre of politically charged debates over the definitions and representations of races and ethnicities, along with debates over the theory of evolution and its representation of our relationship to the species to which we have given the name "animals".

In the New York Museum I visited recently, once again living near it—indeed now virtually in its shadow, I find that the scientific evidence for the story of evolution is more meticulously, more intricately, more compellingly documented than it was in the past, whilst also being explained and exhibited with much more caution and delicacy, and much more attention to the counter-arguments. The theory of evolution is still confronting us with questions for which we have no satisfying answers. We still do not know how planetary life could have arisen from the chance conjunction of nature's elements, inanimate matter. And whereas, in my childhood, the Museum was not sufficiently careful to avoid giving the impression that the indigenous tribes scattered around the globe could be thought of as in some ways primitive or savage, unable or unwilling to rise above the condition of animal nature, the Museum of the present not only avoids this blindness, this morally offensive arrogance, but makes a great effort to present these peoples in a way that encourages, beyond mere sympathy, genuine admiration for their skills and intelligence, and no small measure of understanding in regard to their ways of life. Above all, the Museum of the present is much more careful in its representations of the different "races" and "ethnicities", exposing the untruths concealed within old myths and prejudices, calling attention to the numerous difficulties that research encounters trying to define in strictly genetic and evolutionary terms the very concept of race,

documenting scenes from the history of wars, crusades, and massacres motivated by racial and ethnic hatreds, and representing the brutal realities of the trade in slaves without diminishing any of the terror. Thus, even when visitors are confronted with the undeniable “otherness” of other races, ethnicities, tribes and cultures, what they have been given to see in the museum is their irrefutable sharing and participation in a universal humanity. A new stage in the dialectic of Enlightenment seems to have been thereby attained.

My argument for a paradigm shift will be, here, essentially anecdotal, although, as will become apparent, I have drawn extensively on Michel Foucault’s thought, in particular, his historical analysis in *The Order of Things* (1966), and have benefited more than I can acknowledge here from Friedrich Schelling’s *Treatise on Human Freedom* (1809),⁸ Walter Benjamin’s Schellingian account of natural history in *Origin of the German Mourning Play* (1928),⁹ Theodor Adorno’s essay on “Natural History” (1932),¹⁰ the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) that Adorno worked on with Max Horkheimer,¹¹ and the writings of Martin Heidegger, especially his 1929–1930 seminar, published under the title, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*,¹² in which, among other things, he struggled with the question of animality, a question that, inseparable as it is from the peculiarly obscure question of human nature, he found it necessary to leave in many ways unresolved. But perhaps the intractable character of the problem, its resistance to resolution, stems from Heidegger’s metaphysical assumption, which he will never seriously challenge, that, between human beings and the [other] animals, there is an absolute abyss of difference. Every time Heidegger’s thinking drew him inexorably near the topic of our embodiment, the philosopher

⁸ Schelling, F. W. J. (1936), *Treatise on Human Freedom*. Chicago: Open Court.

⁹ Benjamin, W. (1998), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. London: Verso, New Left Books.

¹⁰ Adorno, T. W. (1984), “The Idea of Natural History,” *Telos* (Summer 1984), nr. 60, pp. 97–124. Also see his discussions of natural history in the 1944 Adorno, T.W. (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press; a work written in collaboration with Max Horkheimer, and his 1966 work, Adorno, T.W. (1973), *Negative Dialectics*. New York: Continuum.

¹¹ Adorno, T.W. and Horkheimer, M. (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹² Heidegger, M. (1995), *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, and Solitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

deferred the questions, unwilling to give them the rigorous thought they demand. Whilst taking Aristotle's ontological definition of the human being—mankind understood as the “rational animal”—as his starting point and arguing forcefully against biological reductionism and the racism it can be treacherously used to legitimate, Heidegger was never able to illuminate the nature of human embodiment. And this meant that he was never able to approach a compelling ontological representation of the being of “Dasein” as human nature.

This ontological difference between human being and animal being—the difference that Heidegger and many of his predecessors turned into a metaphysical difference—is called into question in Franz Kafka's short story, “A Report to an Academy,” in which a creature living like human beings reports to an assembly of scholars and scientists about his former life as an ape. Captured in the wild forests of Africa, he was brought back to the “civilized world” as an object for research. Longing to escape the cage into which, for most of his time, he was kept locked, he found entertainment and distraction undertaking his own research, carefully observing and studying the comportment, the manners and gestures, of the human species, represented, of course, by his captors. Gradually, he succeeded in imitating, or aping them so cleverly that he was released from his cage and mingled with this strange, other species. But the more he took part in the life of human beings, the more he questioned the “freedom” he once imagined to await him outside that terrible cage. Did he merely exchange one cage for another? Kafka leaves us to brood on this question. What is culture, he wonders, if not a sophisticated form of aping—the transmission and inheritance of repetitive cultural patterns, embodied in gestures, bearing, and speech?

Years later, Vladimir Nabokov, asked about the inspiration for one of his novels, related this story, perhaps with Kafka's story in mind. His account, supposedly drawn from memory, was subsequently determined to be one more of his impish masks, a fictional subterfuge:

As far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes, who, after

months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor creature's cage.¹³

What are we, we human beings? What is our nature? What is our place in nature? What should that place be? What wisdom, in regard to these questions, can a museum of natural history impart? As Kant argues in his third Critique, there are limits to what we can learn about nature by way of "determinate reflection". This mode of cognition was deemed appropriate for the acquisition of empirical knowledge about the world; but Kant appreciated that it could not adjust to recognize the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of our experience of the world. In particular, it failed to take account of our experience of purposiveness in nature and in ethical life. *A fortiori*, it could not illuminate adequately and appropriately the intricate dialectic, the intertwining, of nature and human beings that is represented by the concept of "natural history".

§3

For many years, it has been accepted as fact that myth was not only a precursor of science, but itself an archaic type of science: myths form, after all, coherent systems for describing, explaining, predicting, and understanding the natural world. However, whereas modern thought arrogantly assumed that it had left the mythic completely behind, as nothing more than a fascinating relic of our benighted past, Adorno argued, I think compellingly, that myth and science are, and have always been, inextricably intertwined, and that, accordingly, even our latest scientific knowledge, abundantly confirmed though it may be, retains traces and vestiges of mythic configurations. These mythic residues are representatives, he claims, of the prejudices, the unexamined, unchallenged ideological formations, secretly operating in our culture.

In this context, according to Adorno, a certain dialectic is at work: the dialectic, namely, between nature and history. In defining the concept of natural history in his 1932 essay, Adorno makes it clear that what concerns him is something distinctly philosophical: it is not a question

¹³ Nabokov, V. (1991), *The Annotated Lolita*. (Edited with preface, introduction and notes by Alfred Appell, Jr.). New York: Vintage, p. 311.

of the history of nature as an object of natural science; nor is it a question of the history of nature as an object of myth. Although he does not dispute the validity of these approaches to natural history, his concept is intended to recognize the dialectical intertwining of nature and history and, in keeping with this understanding, to set in motion an appropriate project for critical thought—critical social theory—to pursue. Specifically, the dialectical character of the concept is supposed to indicate the possibility that the diremption in which nature and history confront one another in seemingly irreconcilable conflict might be overcome or transcended. But how? We cannot avoid the catastrophic eventualities due to climate changes without fundamental changes in the way we live our lives: not only how we live in and with nature, but how we are to live with one another in order to protect and preserve the natural environment on which we will always depend.

Now, what I want to argue in this light is that the museum of natural history—I mean any such museum, not only the one in New York City—is an institution that, existing in the conceptual space formed by this dialectic, must somehow come to terms with, must somehow negotiate, the question of its legitimacy as an authoritative mediation of this constantly evolving, constantly shifting dialectic, not only showing history as taking place within nature, but also showing nature as historical, hence as a normatively constituted narrative—think of the Book of Nature metaphor here—always subject to conflicts of interpretation and rational debate. And perhaps, in this way, the museum of natural history could even contribute to overcoming or transcending the history of the metaphysical abyss separating the sympathies of human beings from the suffering of the animals that live without the gift of language.

For Georg Lukács, natural history calls our positivistic conception of an absolutely autonomous objective science into question: If reality is inherently dialectical, such that the enquiring subject and its object of enquiry are inextricably intertwined, how would it ever be possible for us to know and interpret the world that the positivist conception of natural science is logically committed to assuming, namely: a thoroughly reified, essential mortified object, a world from which we, as living subjects, must necessarily find ourselves estranged? In the Introduction to their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the authors, presumably at-

tempting to address this very problematic, call for a “remembrance of nature within the subject”: “Eingedenken der Natur im Subjekt”.¹⁴ A beautiful thought! But exactly what kind of remembrance is at stake? We must not hasten to the more obvious answers. For it is surely not what is involved when I remember to carry my umbrella; nor is it what is involved when geology and biology record for future reference the facts established by their research. As Walter Benjamin argued in writing to Max Horkheimer: “history is not simply a science, but also and not least the objects of a form of cultural remembrance [*Eingedenken*].”¹⁵ Hence the historical role of myths as resources of cultural memory. Adorno’s phrase “within the subject” provokes other no less importunate questions. Thus: What is the character of this “subject”? How would this remembrance affect it? How would it be carried, borne and sustained, by the subject? How would it “live”, as it were, within the subject? And finally, we must consider this: Are the existing museums, the existing institutions for keeping natural history in our memory keeping it in the right way? What would be the “right way”—if there is one? How might a museum of natural history be rigorously guided by, and appropriately reflect, its commitment as an institution to this kind of remembrance? Could the museum somehow contribute to the reconciliation of nature and history? Could the museum in any way facilitate the redemption of nature, a “fallen” nature that has since the emergence of human life suffered from our exploitation? For the time being, all that I can suggest as an answer is that this remembrance is ultimately a question of responsibility, a question that has the potential to transform the so-called “subject” in the most profound, most radical ways: raising consciousness of our historical responsibility for nature, raising consciousness of our responsibility for the history and destiny of nature, raising consciousness of our human history as a history that, since time immemorial, has

¹⁴ Adorno, T.W. and Horkheimer, M. (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 32; Adorno, T.W. and Horkheimer, M. (1971), *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, pp. 38–39.

¹⁵ Benjamin, W. “Erkenntnistheoretisches, Theorie des Fortschritts,” in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V, N8, 1, p. 589; Benjamin, W. (1999) “On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in: *The Arcades Project*, (trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin). Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Convolute N8, 1, p. 471.

taken place not merely within nature but in reciprocally consequential interaction with it. If, as I believe, the museum of natural history is an institutional guardian of cultural memory, then its remembrance of nature must be the source of a moral obligation for our protection and preservation of nature—an obligation corresponding to our indebtedness for nature’s blessings. However, the “museum conception” of natural history that determined the exhibits in the museums of natural history from their earliest times until recent years was limited by its unexamined commitment to a paradigm of scientific knowledge that neglected this stewardship, this obligation. The mission of the museum must not be merely a question of accumulating, organizing, interpreting and presenting empirical knowledge; it must also be a place where we learn how to take care of nature, a place where we learn what that means for our form of life—and indeed for our sense of ourselves as beings both natural and human. This understanding of the mission is one that has, around the middle of the twentieth century, finally taken hold, reforming the natural history museum into a place where not only the rationality of determinate empirical judgement, but also the rationality of what Kant calls “reflective judgement” is encouraged and included in the processes of learning. Beginning with empirical data, with singularities, reflective judgement is a search for a fitting universality, a unifying, coherent meaning. By encouraging this form of judgement, the museum is supporting the search: the importance of questions, and not only answers; thinking, not only knowing; and perplexity, instead of certainty. A dialectical methodology.

§4

The story about natural history that Foucault wants to tell in *The Order of Things* commences with the humanism of the Renaissance, passes through what he terms the Classical period, the age of rationalism, roughly defined as beginning in the late sixteenth century and ending in the eighteenth, and culminates in the so-called Modern age of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when rationalism and idealism are challenged and the spirit of a new empiricism and skepticism prevails. Different “epistemes”, that is, configurations of epistemology and

ontology, orders of representation, are characteristic of these different historical periods. In each of these epistemes, there prevails a distinctive methodology prescribing the normative conditions for truth and knowledge, and, correspondingly, a distinctive conception of reality, the possible realm of objects about which there can be appropriate claims to knowledge. Foucault's "archaeology" excavates these fundamental determinants of the different historical periods.

In the Renaissance, natural history was an ordering of resemblances, correspondences based on visible similarities, affinities, sympathies, analogies. Natural history was a hermeneutic science, the interpretation of signs and designs. What mattered were structures, not organic functions. Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* exemplifies the episteme of this time. The "fundamental task" of natural history consisted therefore in determining the essentially constant "arrangements" and "designations". As such, it was a science that remained for the most part at the level of description: description strongly influenced by myths, legends, anecdotes, and superstitions.

What Foucault names the Classical age repudiated these influences in the name of Reason. It was an age of supposedly rational classifications, orders manifest in the very nature of things. It was an age that believed in "a homogeneous space of orderable identities and differences", identities and differences lucidly visible to the natural, but nevertheless rational eye. [OT 268] It recognized that, in the course of their history, natural species have undergone structural alterations, amendments of adaptation; but it did not yet have the concepts to think about evolutionary transformations and took the mutations they perceived to be totally preordained according to taxonomic tables the transparent classificatory ordering of which is eternally fixed and eternally true. Hence it refused to take into account both the historicity of nature—the "nature" it presented, and the historicity of its own methods of enquiry.

In the Classical age, Renaissance and Baroque descriptions of resemblances, correspondences and affinities and classifications by structure were replaced by rationally organized empirical procedures and explanatory schemes. It was now the investigation of more objectively determinable identities and differences that fascinated. However, despite its declared commitment to empiricism and its recognition that taxono-

mies are always in part conventional and that consequently the order of things in themselves cannot guarantee the connection between signifier and signified, this age remained under the spell of rationalism; and it continued to have faith in a universal science of nature grounded in eternally true rational laws precluding chance and merely probabilistic events.

The theory of evolution, together with major discoveries in many of the other natural sciences, ended the Classical age and created an epistemic and ontological revolution in science that brought about historically earthshaking repercussions the significance of which passed into a cultural life far beyond the predictive powers of the sciences. The sciences of nature gained immeasurable power and prestige in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In what Foucault terms the Modern age, a radically new episteme took over: evolutionary models made their appearance; genealogical discontinuities and instabilities were now recognized; chance and relativity were no longer outlawed; visible organic events gave way to deeper, more invisible processes; probabilities and contingencies were acknowledged, and science itself became historical and interpretive.

Foucault's story, his archaeology, ends with the Modern age, mostly represented by events in the nineteenth century. Should we therefore contemplate a Post-Modern age, beginning, say, around the late 1960's and continuing to evolve? In the context of his story, such an age would, I think, be defined by virtue of its radical recognition of difference. It would be the time of the Other. It would be the harbinger of a time when it is no longer morally permissible to make "Man" the measure, the anthropological point of reference for natural history. As we leave the episteme of the twentieth century behind us, essentialism, the assumption of universal sameness, has finally revealed its secret truth, and that truth is violence. This, I take it, is what Foucault means when, in his "Preface", he says, cryptically and coyly, that "Man" is merely a recent invention—an invention, that is, of the Modern period, and is destined soon to vanish, replaced by a new episteme, a new form:

Strangely enough, man—the study of whom is supposed by the naïve to be the oldest investigation since Socrates—is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines

are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. Whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an “anthropology” understood as a universal reflection on man, half-empirical, half-philosophical. It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form. [xxiii]

Writing in 1932 about the history of morality and religion, Henri Bergson gives unequivocal expression to the impossibility of getting, as it were, to the very “bottom” of the enigma that is “Man”, uncovering in the so-called “primitive” peoples of the earth that pure essence of humanity in which the animal nature of the human as such would appear:

Are the “primitive” peoples we observe to-day the image of that humanity? It is hardly probable, since nature is overlaid, in their case as well, by a layer of habits that the social surroundings have preserved in order to deposit them in each individual.

“But,” he goes on to say,

there is reason to believe that this layer is not so thick as in civilized man, and that it allows nature to show more clearly through it.¹⁶

He puts scare-quotes around “primitive”, but none around “nature”: he still assumes the discernability of distinct layers. By the end of the twentieth century, this assumption will no longer be made without evoking vigorous scholarly ridicule.

Contemplating, in his “Conclusion” to *The Order of Things*, the indications already apparent of a paradigm shift in the “fundamental arrangements of knowledge”, Foucault speculates that,

If the existing arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we at the moment can do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. [387]

¹⁶ Bergson, H. (1935, 1949), *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, p. 117.

However, if my recent experience in the New York Museum of Natural History can be trusted, the epistemic shift that Foucault, writing in the middle of the last century, rather grandly and extravagantly prophesizes, as if he were announcing some new conception of eschatology, has already come to pass. And this is why I find myself tempted to think that, in terms of Foucault's historiographic model, we are living—already now—in a Post-Modern world, despite so many reasons to resist that all-too-voguish terminology.

§5

Returning to the Museum after so many years absence, I was completely disoriented. I had expected—quite unreasonably, as of course I realize in retrospect—to find my way around without difficulty, taking pride in my familiarity with such an awesome institution. Gone, however, were the huge, solemn halls with their grand windows and overwhelming spaciousness, welcoming the natural light of day to fall gently on the rows of rectangular glass cases, each one carefully presenting its specimens, its objects, exactly labeled, neatly displayed, in some perfect geometric order. The halls themselves, slightly stuffy, dusty and musty, where not a breath of air stirred, subtly conveyed to the senses, almost at a subliminal level, the impression of a mausoleum or a sepulcher—in any case, a solemn and sober place, quite intimidating for a child, where one must honour the possessions and the claims of absolute knowledge. Entering these halls, where a heavy, hushed silence prevailed, felt like entering a strange temple: a temple, however, without any gods, where one will have come to worship in wonder and awe the irrefutable triumphs of science.

And on display in the glass cases, all the known entities that appear in our world. In the halls with smaller cases, moths and butterflies, meticulously mounted, delicate wings delicately spread; insects of all sizes, shapes, and colours; fossilized trilobites, primitive fish and arachnids; and dazzling formations of crystal and iridescent stones. And in the halls with the much larger display cases, either aligned in rows, with one series running the central length of the hall and two other series placed along the walls, or else occupying the walls floor to ceiling: petrified

skeletons of reptiles and mammals, simulacra of prehistoric animals and the carefully embalmed bodies of mountain lions, wolverines, foxes, and other slowly vanishing denizens of our increasingly denaturalized world, placed in artificial reproductions of their habitats.

The Museum of Natural History was intended to exhibit the history of nature, including the history of “Man” and the “nature” of “Man”. But there was nothing at all “natural” about the history it reported. The artificiality, the fundamentally interpretive or hermeneutical character of the Museum was artfully concealed—as much as possible. In the enchantment of my childhood years, though, I was not aware of this artificiality, this cultural constructedness. Nor did I grasp the significance of the fact, so obvious and so significant for me now, that everything in that Museum was either inanimate or dead. No wonder that the halls vaguely felt more than a little like funerary monuments! Every living thing there had succumbed to its ultimate fate and returned to the immobility of the inanimate, the stone-like, forever petrified. Dead nature. The grizzly bear is standing up, as if to give warnings of his wrath; but he is dead and will never move, never gesture, never chase and threaten. The red-tailed hawk spreads its glorious wings; but it will never fly, never move from its perch. Butterflies, like magical apparitions when fluttering over a garden of flowers, would now evoke nothing but death were I to see them exhibited today as they were exhibited when I was a child. The Museum of Natural History was all about death—but that is a part of the story that the museum never told—never wanted to tell, or perhaps never even thought of telling. Dead nature. Until now!

Now, all the cabinets of curiosities with their painstakingly researched displays of dead nature, were removed from sight, consigned, in a kind of second burial, to their sepulchral vaults in the basement deep underground.

Not only, though, is there nothing “natural” about the exhibitions of nature in the museum of natural history; but in the older Museum of my childhood, the history of nature was told as if that history were without its own historicity. Artifacts were of course dutifully, exactly dated, bones and fossils were dated; earth and rock samples were dated, registering the periods of geological time. And yet, the history of natural history was itself left without any acknowledgement of its role in the

production and institutionalization of the scientific knowledge that the museum presented.

To the deadness of nature, there corresponded a certain conception of knowledge—a conception that, until the consciousness-raising, consciousness-rescuing revolutions of the 1960's, retained and perpetuated some of the epistemological convictions and ontological commitments of Enlightenment rationalism, the spirit of which inaugurated the Modern period. The glass that enframed the exhibits bespoke the rationalist ideal of transparency; the lawful orderliness of the exhibits proclaimed an unquestioned faith in the laws—and indeed, the lawfulness and systematicity—of nature; the labels implied a knowledge of absolute certainty. The displays in their entirety suggested totality, completeness, even finality. In fact, despite all its specimens, all its exhibits, the Museum of my childhood was still, by Foucault's criteria, not fundamentally challenging old rationalist-idealist assumptions.

Herakleitos, the pre-Socratic philosopher from Ephesus, is supposed to have declared that nature loves to hide. This assertion is not representing nature as if it took part in a game for children of hide-and-seek; rather, it was an attempt to express his recognition of the finitude of our knowledge—and to warn, accordingly, against efforts to force nature to surrender all its treasures, all its mysteries. Science, he thought, must respect, must indeed protect and preserve, the hiddenness of nature, the withdrawing of nature into the mystery of its self-concealment. In “The Age of the World Picture” and “The Question of Technology”, Martin Heidegger reiterated this warning, arguing that, in attempting to turn nature into an object of total control, total availability, total knowability, our civilization is risking a grave danger—the danger that, after Nietzsche, he called nihilism.¹⁷ In the Modern age, the natural history museum exposed nature—at least implicitly—to the vision of total visibility. And the glass cases and carefully constructed stagings of nature conveyed, even if not with intention, the impression that nature could

¹⁷ See: Heidegger, M. (1977), “The Question Concerning Technology” and “The Age of the World Picture”, in: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row.

always be made to stand still for us—in other words, it could always be made into what Heidegger termed an available “standing reserve”.

Since the early years of modern natural science, when the possibility of achieving a rigorously unified, systematic knowledge of nature in its totality seemed to be an eminently rational and empirical assumption, we have learned a certain degree of humility. But there are still many, today, who will defend the idea of a program of research that aspires to unify all domains of knowledge, all universes of discourse, not just the natural sciences and the human sciences, but indeed even the humanities, according to an evolutionary paradigm ultimately reducible to biochemistry, physics, and mathematics. (Consider in this regard E.O. Wilson’s argument for “consilience”.) As an ideal, the unity of the natural sciences is not necessarily something to be repudiated. But reductionism for the sake of such unity is problematic. Such unifying reductionism has, no doubt, a certain aesthetic appeal; but the understanding of life that it must sacrifice is of incalculable value, much too important to lose. In the final analysis, such a program, such an ideal, could succeed only by constructing a unity in which knowledge would become, once again, knowledge only of the dead. We need a science that serves the flourishing of animal, plant, and human life—we need, as the Jena Romantics of the early nineteenth century proclaimed, a rigorous science that is also, as it were, a form of poetry—what Friedrich Schlegel would call a “sympathetic” science.

The natural history museums of the Renaissance, the Classical age, and the Modern age were made for viewing; they were constructed for only one of the five senses. What do we *see* when we look into exhibitions framed in glass cases? Reified nature, a nature to be conquered, mastered, and possessed, totally accessible to the grasp of knowledge. In the post-1960’s, Post-Modern Museum, everything has changed. Whereas, the museum of the Modern age privileged the all-knowing, totalizing, sovereign gaze, encouraging systematic contemplation as mastery and domination, the Post-Modern promotes interactions, engagements, questions. Whereas the exhibitions in the museum of the earlier period often could give the impression that there are certainties, totalities, essentialities, and universals, the exhibitions in the museum of the present encourage more questions and more skepticism with regard to these as-

sumptions, urging attention to significant differences more than to obvious but superficial similarities, identities, and unities. Whereas the earlier museums did not sufficiently challenge absolutes, the Post-Modern is comfortable with relativisms, probabilities, even randomness and coincidence. And whereas the older museum was unhappy with fragments of knowledge, the contemporary museum is willing to admit them.

But there can be no doubt, I think, that the most obvious, and also most important difference between the older Museum and the one with which I have recently become acquainted is that, because of our extraordinary advances in technologies, the exhibits are no longer silent, petrified, and dead: at long last, they have come to life, have become sites of dialectical interaction with a living nature, where visitors can not only question, explore, and experiment, but also learn how this nature is affected by different types of interaction. The significance of this difference is that it raises the hope that the younger generations visiting the museum of today will have a deeper understanding of their place in natural history and, in consequence, a greater sense of responsibility for the future well-being of nature. Nature is a sacred bequest from one generation to the next. So too is our quest to understand it.

§6

“Natural history” is a concept that is, I suggest, peculiarly appropriate for the conceptual interpretation of our time. If, on the one side, it would remind us of the truth that what we call “nature” exists only, in fact, in relation to a world that we human beings have constructed and that the only “nature” accessible to us is a “nature” constituted in terms of our history, on the other side it would remind us that our historical being takes place within the realm of nature and that, therefore, all our institutions, in fact, the entire world that since time immemorial we have struggled to build, will, as they must, succumb to the fate of all things natural: decay, corruption, ruination—in a word, finitude. In times past, the museums of natural history evaded this truth, despite the warnings from an earlier century, represented in the Baroque “still life” paintings, where, next to the abundance of nature, the artists would place a sobering human skull. True, the Classical museums showed skel-

etons, mummification, funerary artifacts, and burial sites; but the impression they ultimately sought to convey was one of defiance: enlightenment, science, will eventually triumph over death, the final power of nature. Today we no longer evade the truth: finitude, mortality, the precariousness—despite the progress in our sciences, our technologies, our cultural enlightenment—of all natural forms of life. And yet, this wisdom is endangered by the very interactions that I have welcomed. For if the interactive technologies that today's museums provide can not only show their visitors more knowledge than they can possibly absorb, can adumbrate realms of ignorance and limitations to our knowledge, and even reveal in very immediate ways the consequences for nature of our different possible interactions with it, they can also, unfortunately, encourage, instead of humility and a recognition of our responsibility, a false and dangerous feeling of empowerment—as if, with the pressing of a button or the turning of a handle, we could manipulate a passive, compliant nature to satisfy all our desires.

To its credit, the Museum in New York, conscious, like other reconstructed museums of natural history, of this challenging dialectical aporia, is constantly endeavouring to create exhibits that can encourage a “remembrance of nature in the subject” and secure an abiding sense of our responsibility as guardians of a nature that our knowledge, despite its impressive vastness, will never completely master. Moreover, the museum of natural history must also reflect, and reflect on, the fact that the museum is itself a fragment of natural history: an institution with a responsibility to show its own role in the history of interpretations of nature and its own interventions, as an institution of research, in the historical fate of nature. In other words, what, in distinction to the Modern museum of natural history, the Post-Modern museum embodies above all is, I think, a stronger and sharper recognition of the Other—hence, the indeclinable responsibility to raise and sustain provocative questions regarding the objectives and the consequences of our interactions with nature and no less provocative questions about the variables and invariables of human nature.

This is, in the broadest sense, a matter that concerns the political vocation of the museum, because the natural history museum has become what it always already was, a point of reference, a center, around which

a community can examine not only its diverse belief-formations—its superstitions, prejudices and presuppositions, its hopes and articles of faith, especially with regard to its conception of human nature and its recognition of the Other, whether that be other human beings, other animals, the other forms of nature, or the realm of the transcendent; it can also examine its rituals and other social-cultural practices, all the amazingly diverse and complex systematicities through which creaturely life is formed into meaningful experience, a coherent design, as natural history.¹⁸

§7

The natural history museum has from the very beginning been an institution organized for research—a function that the visiting public tends to forget. Now, as the natural history museum transforms itself into a research institution of the twenty-first century, it is beginning to look into the past with a complex of new materials, new instruments, new techniques, and new concepts. Unquestionably, one of the most powerful and most promising involves the analysis of DNA samples extracted from all the dead life in its keeping.¹⁹ There is an immeasurably vast wealth of biological information kept in the skins and skeletons and other organic matter that the museums have been preserving. Within the next five years, it is anticipated that museums will be able to sequence the entire genomes contained in many of their specimens; and they will be able to contribute to our understanding of evolutionary patterns in ways that today are nothing but the fantasies of science fiction. This information can serve not only to reveal a prehistoric past; it can, and will, also benefit the future of the planet, for, among other things, it makes possible much better maintenance and stewardship of presently

¹⁸ Some of the reflections formulated in this essay are explored further in “Damals: The Melancholy Science of Memory in W. G. Sebald’s Stories,” one of the chapters in *Redeeming Words: Language, Literature, and the Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning*, the book project, nearing completion, on which I am currently working.

¹⁹ For an overview of the possibilities and pitfalls of extracting DNA from museum specimens, as well as a review of studies that have applied the technique, see: Wandeler, P., Hoeck, P. E. A., and Keller, L. F. (2007), “Back to the Future: Museum Specimens in Population Genetics,” in: *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, vol. 22 (2007), pp. 634–642.

living species, especially those threatened with extinction. And beyond this, who knows what other benefits for planetary life lie hidden in the collections of dead life that the museums have preserved?

In any event, the natural history museums of today have transformed themselves: in every way, it is influencing the future and not memorializing the past that is their ultimate concern. Even the way their visitor exhibits are designed serves this end, for they manifest, as never before, a lucid awareness that the children of today, which the exhibits enchant and teach, will one day be responsible for all the life on this glorious planet.

As what we call “nature” and what we call “history”—and their dialectical intersection in the force field of “natural history”—have become, as never before, matters of cultural contestation, the museum of natural history has correspondingly undertaken to transform itself into an institution where this contestation, and the freedom of thought it requires, can flourish. The museum of natural history that fits the Post-Modern episteme will make us, its visitors, endlessly question our assumptions about the natural and challenge our inheritance of history—and, above all, it will not only make us familiar with ourselves; it will also make us into strangers to ourselves, even revealing that in ourselves which is other than the “human” we have believed in. For in the museum of natural history, nature comes to appearance in all its beauty and sublime mystery, all its wildness and monstrosity, as a ceaseless challenge that not only demands knowledge, the continuing formation and refinement of our concepts and technologies; it also makes demands on our culturally instituted self-knowledge, our ethical capacity to respond to the needs, solicitations, and claims of the natural world. Indeed, if it is true that, as Kant declared in his third critique, *The Critique of Judgment*, in our experience of the awesome beauty and sublimity of nature a symbolic connection to morality is constituted, then it is manifest that nature has always already engaged our proto-moral sensibilities long before we were capable of moral judgment and the pursuit of natural science—indeed, I believe, even before the emergence of memory. I think that, more keenly than did the museums of earlier centuries, the contemporary Post-Modern museum recognizes the significance of this moral connection, this

“bonding” for the future of the planet and the civilization that depends upon its blessings.

The future will take the measure of whom we of today are, as individuals and as societies, by judging how we lived up to the moral responsibility towards which nature’s bounty and beauty have been directing us. Natural history will thus be the record of a fateful test of our moral resolve: how we respond to nature’s condition in learning how to live in nature and with nature as its appointed guardians. Natural history will be the record that reveals who we are and what we want to become. The fate of nature and the fate of our ethical life are forever bound up in a remembrance of nature in the subject.²⁰

²⁰ An earlier version of this essay was presented in February, 2010 as the year’s Aquinas Lecture at Manhattan College, Riverdale, New York. I am grateful to Professor Seamus Carey and the College for the opportunity to try out the thoughts presented here.