

## Walking among plants

Michael Marder

On the verge of a brief journey I'd love you to join me in, and as we get ready for a mental exercise in phyto-peripatetics, let us begin with a simple contrast. When we walk in a field, meander in a grove, or stroll in a garden, we move among plants that stay in place. It bears noting right away that the contrast is a little deceptive: vegetal being-in-place is not the opposite of movement. Plants move in the locales of their growth precisely by virtue of growing, irradiating outwards, unfurling themselves, and experiencing a lived time-space, which does not predate them as an empty continuum but which co-evolves together with and as them. Even so, human displacement among trees, shrubs, grasses, and flowers accentuates our locomotion against the backdrop of their presumably stationary existence. And this bare beginning, discernible in the contrast which will accompany us all the way to the end, is not without significance.

The most unsympathetic interpretation would assert that, playing with the opposition between human mobility and vegetal immobility, we (however unconsciously) establish or reestablish our superiority over the flora. It is as though a walker is saying by means of the body's kinetic activity and, hence, without uttering anything: "Look: I can linger for a little while under the shade of an oak or in front of a rose, but I can also move on, whether to another plant or to another place altogether. Or I might not linger at all, rather keeping a steady pace at which the vegetation around me coalesces into a kind of green blur. In these possibilities, reflecting my decision, lies my freedom—the freedom you, plants, cannot have." I reject this cruel interpretation, especially in those cases when walking among plants is done for nothing, i.e., not in order to reach some other destination but to lose and perhaps discover (or rediscover) oneself in the vegetal world.

Backtracking for a moment, I must retrace my steps and comment upon peripatetic philosophy, as alive in Aristotle's Lyceum as in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's reveries. *Peri + patein*: walking around. Around what? Which perimeter does a walker-thinker circumscribe? Itinerant, philosophers may well walk among plants—or the colonnades that have supplanted plants as human

reinventions of tree trunks in the academy of Athens—but they invariably revolve around themselves, notably their thoughts. In fact, the adjective “peripatetic” makes no mention whatsoever of the context wherein walking around takes place, and it is this abstraction from the surroundings that invisibly prepares the ground for the abstract universality indifferent to its *when* and *where*. Such universality then passes for thought.

That said, the peripatetics realize, if only implicitly, that there is no direct route to oneself. Thought is activated thanks to detours and digressions, first, through physical walks prompting the body to move so as to shake cognition out of its stagnation, and, second, through the vegetal world. Plants, as well as their remainders or reminders, become the signposts for our movement, not so much helping orient us in space as orienting us in thought (recall Kant’s “What Is Orientation in Thinking?”), referring us, who walk among them, back to ourselves. Do they do so by way of the contrast, with which we have started this foray, now resembling a constant digression? Do they give something to thought—to thinking as an activity and its own outcome; to be thought, infinitely, into the future—that cannot be found elsewhere?

Rousseau’s peripatetic experience is nonetheless dissimilar to that we encounter in classical philosophy. His returns to himself via the mediation of walking among plants are incidental; what prevails in his *Reveries* is the daydream, a freely associative, hardly self-conscious existence with and in the flora. His “botanical expeditions,” the countryside strolls during which he collected the commonest of plant specimens, were intended to lose, rather than to find, himself. The ecstasy of the desired self-abandon was best achieved through the walker’s contact with vegetation outside him, which drew him back to the vegetal dimension of his own life. For Rousseau, botany was a “salutary science”: a poison and a remedy, despite the pitfalls of scientific rationality, it held the potential of reorienting modern humanity away from the excesses of civilization that, more and more, set us adrift. Along the same lines, it is possible to conclude that walking among plants is conducive to a salutary movement of thought, pulling against the cognitive tendency toward abstraction and thus embedding our ideas once again in sensuous experience.

The sensuous experience of the vegetal world reawakens in us another kind of thinking resistant to abstraction. Swathed in the sights and smells, tastes

(if we are lucky enough to stumble upon berries or fruit) and tactile sensations (for instance, of grass against bare feet, but most often not those mediated by the hand, unless this typically privileged organ of touch is used gently to move aside a branch blocking the path), peripatetic explorers feel-think on the periphery of their sentient bodies, akin to plants that cognize the world on the outer edges of their extension (root tips, unfurling leaves, and so forth). Rather than objectifying, thinking *of* something, or representing, we discover what it means to think around while walking around—peripatetically, peripherally, perimetrically. In addition to the sensuous materiality of thought, whither plants recall us, they give us this other mode of thinking to think, the mode I have termed “essentially superficial.” Our contact with them could not be more superficial than when we walk among—not past—them, the lived times and spaces of vegetal and human beings hardly brushing upon one another, which is what a genuine encounter looks and feels like.

Walking in the midst of plants, we above all cherish the difference between us and them, as well as among them. I resist the contemporary proposals, many of them inspired in the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, to become-X: here, to become-plant. Mature humanity, ready to share in difference with human and non-human beings alike, eschews the ancient mimetic need to become the other, the need betokening more than anything a certain anthropocentric imperialism. The rhythm of our walking and living among plants will not coincide with the rhythm, tempo, or temporality of vegetal vitality, its movements virtually imperceptible, because much slower than those of locomotion. But there is nothing wrong with the dissonance between the cadences of human and plant existences, revealed in the course of phyto-peripatetic ventures. The discrepancy dispenses to each their own: it makes us alive to the otherwise taken-for-granted pace of our being in the world and to the underappreciated otherness of plants that are in the world in a distinct manner. Tangentially, peripherally, the act of walking among plants gives an intimation of ontological justice, appropriating neither side to the needs of the other, acknowledging the co-involvement and mindful of the divide between the vegetal and the human.

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He is author of [Plant-Thinking : A Philosophy of Vegetal Life](#) (2013, New York: Columbia University Press), [The Philosopher's Plant : An Intellectual Herbarium](#) (2014, Columbia University Press), [The Chernobyl Herbarium : Fragments of an Exploded Consciousness](#) (Open Humanities Press), [Through Vegetal Being : Two Philosophical Perspectives](#) (in collaboration with Luce Irigaray. 2016, Columbia University Press) among other titles. His new work *Hegel's Energy: A Reading of The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press) will be published in 2021.

This text was first published in 2017 as part of the book [Four Walks](#), edited by **Gerard Ortín Castellví**. The book revolves around four walk-performances that took place between 2012 and 2016: [Intravía](#) (Barcelona, 2012 & 2014), [Vijfhoek](#) (Diemen & Amsterdam, 2015), [Trabeska](#) (Arrasate-Mondragón, 2015), [Haga—DK51](#) (Stockholm, 2016). It includes another text by **Sonia Fernández Pan** and photographs by **Marc Vives Muñoz**, **Irati Gorostidi Agirretxe** and **Mirari Echávarri López**. The text has been published on-line in 2020 on the occasion of the project *Ecologies of the ghost Landscape* at [tranzit.sk](#), curated by **Borbála Soós**.