CHAPTER 24

Seeing Green: The Climbing Other

Dawn Sanders

Attentional Field

In his books *About Looking* and *Why Look at Animals?* Berger provokes us to restructure our attentional field to plants both within, and beyond, an anthropocentric lens. As John Berger has noted, "our customary visible order is not the only one: it coexists with other orders" (2009, 10). In contemporary everyday life the complex morphologies and behaviors plants possess are often reduced to simple contextualized categories, so, for example, *Monstera deliciosa* experiences life in captivity as an "ornamental house-plant," in which it will "roar for space" (ourhouseplants.com); *Hedera helix* is commonly viewed on an antagonistic continuum between an "attractive" plant, which can make shady walls interesting and a rapid-growing "nuisance" on homes and walls. Beyond its natural borders *Hedera helix* has been described as "an invader.

Climbing was one of the plant movements that fascinated Charles Darwin. In his desire to study this aspect of "plantness" he used the walls of his own home as an experimental plane upon which to watch the "twitchers, twiners, climbers and scramblers" (Browne 2003, 417). He grew an *Echinocystis lobata* plant, whose behaviors he described in a letter to Hooker written on June 25, 1863, an extract of which follows:

> Having the plant in my study I have been surprised to find that the uppermost part of each branch, (ie the stem between the two uppermost leaves, excluding the growing tip) is constantly and slowly twisting round, making a circle in from 1 1/2 to 2 hours: it will sometimes go round 2 or 3 times, & then at same rate untwists & twists in opposite direction. It generally rests half an hour before it retrogrades. The stem does not become permanently twisted. The stem beneath the twisting portion does not move in the least, though not tied. The movement goes on all day & all early night— It has no relation to light for the plant stands in my window & twists from the light just as quickly as towards it.
>
> This may be common phenomenon for what I know; but it confounded me quite when I began to observe the irritability of the tendrils.—I do not say it is final cause, but the result is pretty for the plant every 1 1/2 or 2 hours sweeps a circle, (according to length of bending shoot & length of tendril) of from 1 foot to 20 inches in diameter, & immediately that the tendril touches any object its sensitiveness causes it immediately to seize it. A clever gardener, my neighbour, who saw the plant on my table last night, said "I believe, Sir, the tendrils can see, for wherever I put the plant, it finds out any stick near enough". I believe the above is the explanation, viz that it sweeps slowly round & round. The tendrils, have some sense, for they do not grasp each other when young. (Darwin Correspondence Project Letter 4221)

So, Darwin became increasingly intimate with the diverse strategies plants employ to sense structures that can aid their clamber away from the dark towards the light.

Time-lapse photography has enabled the private lives of plants, and the subtle complexities of their movements, to become visible to humans, and yet we still appear to render such movements invisible. In *Of Plants, and Other Secrets*, Michael

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Marder suggests such inattention to botanical life is related to the fact that "we are largely asynchronous with plants" (2013, 19) and "have neither the patience nor the capacity to linger with them, to accompany their development and growth" and thus "a face-to-face relation to plants is a non-starter" (20). Nonetheless, humans continue to live in close proximity to their "house-plants," and those plants that colonize the walls in, and around, urban dwellings.

Londa Schiebinger affirms the act of naming plants "as a deeply social process" (2004, 195) and speaks of the "linguistic imperialism" of binomial names developed by the Swedish botanist, Linnaeus. However, an even greater act of imperialistic enclosure is embodied in the treatment of domesticated climbing plants. Subsequently, at the same moment in time, a confined tropical climber (*Monstera*) can be held captive inside a human home, while outside a self-clinging creeper (*Hedera*) scales the walls before sensing the cut of a gardener's secateurs. In his essay on the sculpture of Romaine Lorquet, Berger suggests, in the context of postindustrial culture, that "anything which enters that culture has to sever its connections with nature" (1980, 189); in relation to Berger's statement, the plant behaviors of both *Monstera* and *Hedera* have been restrained by humans, such that their capacity for "plantness" has been pruned to fit the truncated "nature" of urban human culture.

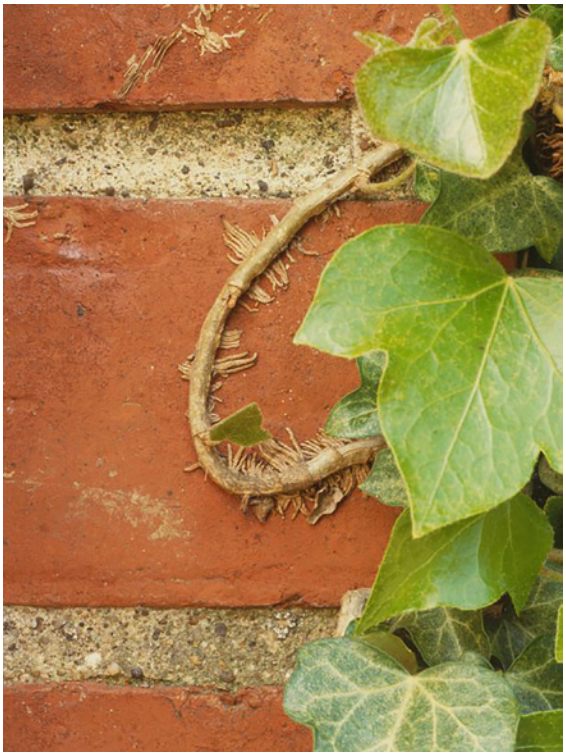

FIGURE 24.1 Hedera helix (Dorling Kindersley, 2010) Image in public domain.

Morphology

Hedera helix climbs by using "aerial rootlets" with matted pads which cling tightly to substrate. In short, it is a phytogecko running the walls of human life.

Monstera deliciosa is a tropical climber. In the wild, the germinating seedling has an interesting characteristic:

> the seedlings, upon germination, will grow in the direction of the darkest area (not just merely away from light) until they encounter the base of a tree to grow on. They will then begin to climb toward the light which is generally up into the canopy of the tree upon which it is growing. (University of Connecticut, 2016)

It possesses two types of leaf—unsplit and split, the latter being preferred in house-plants for aesthetic reasons. Indeed, some house-plant internet sites encourage the "polishing" of the dark shiny leaves; thereby creating houseplant housework.

Lingering

Given that much of this confined "plantness" happens in and around domestic settings, it is ironic that the site for Darwin's work on climbing plants was his family home in Kent-Down House. Here,

FIGURE 24.2 Monstera leaf (source Wikimedia Commons) Image in public domain.

in his study, on the walls of his house and in the garden Darwin entwined himself in vegetal behaviors. Berger suggests, in his essay *The Field* that our observance of a "first event" can lead us to observe other events, which result in us being "within the experience" (1980, 196–97). Darwin, through his lengthy observations of climbing plant events became closely familiar with the subtle nuances of plant movement and the "quietly complicated lives of plants" (Browne 2003, 163). Such familiarity, I would suggest, came about because Darwin chose to "linger" and "accompany" plant-life in its own temporal zone resulting in him being, in Berger's words, "within the experience" of "plantness." In so doing Darwin could discern, and delineate, the various features that enable climbing plants to clamber away/towards the dark to reach the light. Rebecca Solnit suggests that we have come to think of landscapes' "crucial condition" as space, but she argues "its deepest theme is time" (Solnit, 2001). In the context of attending to plants in our everyday spaces perhaps taking time to linger and accompany botanical actions will assist us to see the green plant rather than the climbing other.

"Mother, what is it?" asked Kezia.

Linda looked up at the fat swelling plant with its cruel leaves and fleshy stem. High above them, as though becalmed in the air, and yet holding so fast to the earth it grew from, it might have had claws instead of roots. The curving leaves seemed to be hiding something; the blind stem cut into the air as if no wind could shake it.

"That is an aloe, Kezia," said her mother.

"Does it ever have any flowers?"

"Yes, Kezia," and Linda smiled down at her, and half shut her eyes. "Once every hundred years." (Mansfield 1962, 35)