

Vegetal anti-metaphysics: Learning from plants

Michael Marder

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Abstract By denying to vegetal life the core values of autonomy, individualization, self-identity, originality, and essentiality, traditional philosophy not only marginalizes plants but, inadvertently, confers on them a crucial role in the current transvaluation of metaphysical value systems. From the position of absolute exteriority and heteronomy, vegetation accomplishes a *living* reversal of metaphysical values and points toward the collapse of hierarchical dualisms.

Keywords Plants · Being · Metaphysics

Metafísica? Que metafísica têm aquelas árvores?
Fernando Pessoa, “*Há Metafísica Bastante...*”
“Metaphysics? What metaphysics do those trees have?”
Fernando Pessoa, “*There is Enough Metaphysics...*”

What does metaphysics have to do with plants? What can this group of heterogeneous beings, as different from one another as a stalk of wheat and an oak tree, tell us about Being “as such and as a whole,” let alone about resisting the core metaphysical values of presence and identity that the totality of Being entails? A pessimistic answer to these questions is that the bewildering diversity of vegetation is reduced, at bottom, to the conceptual unity “plant” in a signature gesture of metaphysical violence seeking to eliminate differences, for instance, between a raspberry bush and moss, a mayflower and a palm tree. *The* plant cannot offer any resistance to metaphysics because it is one of the impoverished products of the metaphysical obsession with primordial unity, an obsession not derailed but, to the contrary, supported by the scientific systems of classification that, from antiquity

M. Marder (✉)
Ikerbasque Research Professor, The University of the Basque Country,
Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain
e-mail: michael.marder@gmail.com

onwards, have been complicit in the drive toward identity across hierarchically organized differences of species, genus, family, and so forth. The ontic manifestation of this ontological consolidation of the plant is the “monocrop,” such as sugar cane, which increasingly displaces varied horticultures all over the world, but, especially, in the global South. Metaphysics and capitalist economy are in unmistakable collusion, militating, as they do, against the dispersed multiplicities of human and non-human lives; economic rationality, which currently treats plants as sources of bio-energy or biofuel, converts, concretely and on a global scale, the metaphysical principles of sameness and identity into the modes of production and reproduction of material existence *in toto*.

That is not to say, however, that there is nothing in vegetation that escapes this double objectifying grasp. In what follows, I will argue that, by denying to vegetal life the core values of autonomy, individualization, self-identity, originality, and essentiality, traditional philosophy not only marginalizes plants but, inadvertently, confers on them a crucial role in the current transvaluation of metaphysical value systems. From the position of absolute exteriority and heteronomy, vegetation accomplishes a *living* reversal of metaphysical values and points toward the collapse of hierarchical dualisms. It is—to apply the categories Althusser used in his historical analysis of capitalism—the weakest link in the metaphysical chain, where the repressed contradictions are condensed into their purest state and where worn out justifications get so thin as to put the entire system on the verge of rupture.

1 Back to the middle: The inversions of the plant

At the inception of Western metaphysics in Plato’s thought, a dire attempt is made to harness the plant for the purposes of justifying the unique theo-ontological status of the human. The highest kind of soul is housed, as Plato states in *Timaeus*, “at the top of our body,” *akrō tō sōmati*, elevating us to the position “not [of] an earthly but [of] a heavenly plant—up from the earth towards our kindred in the heaven.” The root of the human plant is to be sought not in the ground below its feet—since this would result in a confusion with the earthly plants that, etymologically, connote something driven in, if not pushed into the ground, with the feet (*plantare*)—but in the sky, in the eidetic sphere, in *topos ouranios*, which bestows upon us our humanity. “For it is by suspending our head and root [*kephalèn kai rizan*] from whence the substance of our soul first came that the divine power keeps upright our whole body.”¹ In light of Plato’s analogy, human mobility is insubstantial in comparison to the invisible rootedness (indeed, the autochthony) of the human in the realm of Ideas, the imperceptible thread that binds the top of our body, the head, to the eidetic sphere, from which it receives its nourishment and without which the heavenly plant would wither away. The soul’s ground, the ethereal soil wherein it first sprouted, is the realm of Ideas, which remains responsible for the sustenance and continued existence of the psyche. Only when this tie is kept intact is the body

¹ Plato (1929, 90a).

itself kept “upright,” morally and otherwise, in the sense that the rational soul maintains firm control over the animal and vegetal desires in us. Western metaphysics commences, therefore, with the *inversion of the earthly perspective of the plant*, a deracination of human beings from their material foundations, their transplantation into the heavenly domain, and the correlative devaluation of the literal plant mired, with its roots, in the darkness of the earth as well as in non-conscious existence.² And it continues, in the early modern period, thanks to the refinement of the vegetal metaphorization of metaphysics, for instance, in Descartes’ famous letter to Picot, the French translator of *Principia Philosophiae*, where he asserts that “Philosophy as a whole is like a tree, of which the roots are Metaphysics, the trunk is Physics, and the branches, emerging from the trunk, are all the other branches of knowledge...”³ The tree of knowledge captured in this indelible description does not merely reduce metaphysics to a part, however vital, of the epistemic plant but firmly anchors it in a new *topos ouranios* of Cartesian “first philosophy.” While the root of this tree is liberated from the darkness of the ground, given that metaphysics necessitates clear and distinct ideas, the scientific branches point downward, to the empirical realities that are the objects of their investigation. In twentieth-century terms, honed by Sarah Kofman, one could say that the heavenly plant (as well as the philosophical tree of knowledge) is a topsy-turvy image produced in the *camera obscura* of metaphysical ideology that demotes earthly vegetation to its own distorted reflection.

Although the morphology of the literal plant is retained notwithstanding its idealization, its spatial position and telluric attachment to the earth form the counterpoint to the metaphysical coordinates of the human. For Nietzsche, as much as for Heidegger, it was tempting, at the end of metaphysics, to capitalize on the vegetal metaphor and to invert the Platonic inversion of the human. Would such an overturning align the human perspective with that of the plant? Not quite. Nietzsche’s perspectivalism, contesting the idea that there is one objective truth, applies not only to differences in perspective among human beings but also between human and non-human living entities. Whereas, from the standpoint of the human, “man” is, indeed, a measure of all things, for the plant, vegetal being is the ultimate standard and point of reference (“The plant is also a *measuring being*”⁴); Nietzsche’s generalized perspectivalism, applicable both to individual human beings and to non-human species, complicates all attempts to set the inverted metaphysical edifice aright by means of yet another inversion. In addition to differences in perspective among human beings, the truth of and for a plant remains radically different to everything measured in human terms.

Heidegger, too, does not favor a simple overturning of metaphysics, even though his propensity to bemoan the loss of human autochthony might be taken as a nostalgic yearning for a plant-like existence of humanity. The 1955 “Memorial

² As Graham Parkes concludes in *Composing the Soul*, “...in view of Nietzsche’s fondness for the vegetal metaphors, Plato’s image of the inverted plant must be anathema: the tree of life *turned upside down!*” (1994, p. 179).

³ Descartes (1991, p. xxiv). Cf., also, Ariew (1992).

⁴ Nietzsche (2009, p. 138).

Address,” celebrating the 175th birthday of the composer Conradin Krauser, is galvanized by positive allusions to Johann Peter Hebel’s aphorism, “We are plants which—whether we like to admit it to ourselves or not—must with our roots rise out the earth in order to bloom in the ether and to bear fruit.”⁵ Heidegger’s interpretation of Hebel sounds like a direct rejoinder to Plato’s grounding of the human plant in the eidetic ether: “The poet means to say: For a truly joyous and salutary human work to flourish, man must be able to mount from the depth of his home ground up into the ether. Ether here means the free air of the high heavens, the open realm of the spirit.”⁶ Does the Romantic plant-like image of creative genius, which Heidegger seems to endorse here, flout the strict divisions between the analytics of categories (things) and of human existence (Dasein), on which he insisted in *Being and Time*? Upon a closer look, Heidegger rejects the Romantic glorification of homesickness, treating it as an unfortunate side effect of the modern condition and undersigning the conservative—if not the parochial—rhetoric of “home” and of the plant metaphor conjoined with it. And it is, precisely, with reference to “home ground” that the alignment of the vegetal and the human perspectives crumbles: human rootedness in the homeland is something of which the plants are not capable, because, as Heidegger points out elsewhere, unlike humans, they do not dwell, do not inhabit a place, do not have any way of accessing the world. Within the framework of “natural history,” the autochthony of Dasein is already a kind of uprootedness.

Regardless of the unavoidable imprecision in their alignment, the directionalities of human growth in Hebel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger coincide with the plant flourishing from the ground up, rather than suspended by its roots from heavens. The first stage of *Umwertung* (the Nietzschean transvaluation of old values) consists in a twofold overturning, so that everything previously esteemed as “high” is placed beneath what used to be dismissed as “low,” and vice versa. Preempting Nietzsche and Heidegger, a quintessentially materialist French philosopher, Julien Offray de la Mettrie had already attempted to rid the plant-human homology of transcendental overtones. In a thinly veiled attack on Plato, la Mettrie asserted, “Man is not, as some have said, a topsy-turvy tree with the brain as root, for the brain is just the joining together of the abdominal veins, which are formed first...”⁷ However naïve his actual physiology might have been, la Mettrie recognized, with quasi-evolutionary discernment, the relative lateness of Plato’s “highest kind of soul,” understood as “the brain,” as well as the primacy of what corresponds to the appetitive or the vegetal soul in ancient Greek philosophy, transcribed into “the abdominal veins.” It is, perhaps, more surprising that, starting with the human and homologizing it to the plant, German idealists have undertaken still another inversion. Goethe, Schelling, Novalis, and, especially the naturalist philosopher Lorenz Oken, judged the flower to be the highest spiritual development the plant may attain, so much so that “flowers are the allegories of consciousness or the

⁵ Qtd. in Heidegger (1966, p. 47).

⁶ Heidegger (1966, pp. 47–48).

⁷ la Mettrie (1994, p. 78).

head”⁸ and the “corolla is the brain of plants, that which corresponds to the light.”⁹ It is not that the flower functions as a material substratum of spirit, as a body onto which the spiritual stamp is impressed, but, rather, that spirit itself submits to the flower, capitulates before it. The materialist and the idealist hypotheses, represented by la Mettrie and Oken respectively, are merely two sides of the same coin: whereas the former shows that the human equivalent to the system of roots in a plant is none other than the digestive system, the latter demonstrates that the vegetal counterpart of the brain is the flower. In each case, the “high” and the “low,” enunciated in terms of value, perfectly match the spatial orientation and the physiological ordering of the two kinds of creatures. Thus mapped onto various parts of the earthly plant, materialism corresponds to the roots, with their attachment to the soil, while idealism stands for the flower, whose proper medium is air.

The second stage in the transvaluation of values, which Heidegger failed to recognize in his criticism of Nietzsche’s “simple” overturning of Platonism, entails questioning the very hierarchical arrangement of psycho-physiological elements and their roles in the living organism. Phenomenology, after all, teaches us that the sense of what is above and below, to the left and to the right, before and behind me is relative to the spatial position of my body, which is not just a thing in the world but which acts as “ground zero,” the ultimate, albeit ever-shifting, point of reference for my world. To lead this logic to the extreme is to argue that the spatiality of all living beings, unmoored from all objective determinations as much as from a global and disincarnated perspective that denies its own perspectivalism, will require that a different sense of what is above and below, etc. be laboriously worked out from the standpoint of the particular life-form in question.

The death-throws of objectivist metaphysics see the highest point in a homogenous and abstract spatiality stripped of the absolute privilege it had enjoyed hitherto. Rather than search for a more accurate analogue to the objectively fixed head, it is imperative, in keeping with this intensified transvaluation, to perform a symbolic decapitation or castration of the old metaphysical values. French author Francis Ponge puts flowers and vegetal life in general at the forefront of such an effort, for instance, when he asserts that they have no head, *pas de tête*.¹⁰ The ambiguity of this French expression, which is not as definitive as Jean-Luc Nancy’s invocation of the acephalic (or headless) discourse productive of dense non-sense,¹¹ should not escape our attention. At the juncture between a mere inversion and a leveling of hierarchical metaphysical oppositions, *pas de tête* can mean “no head,” or it can refer to the “step of the head.” Its indeterminate, unstable meaning invokes the act of walking on one’s head, feet up, or losing one’s head altogether, something the author strives toward, following the example of plants: “*Quitter ma tête, descendre au noeud de l’être, situé...sous quelques centimètres de terreau...*[To leave my head, to descend to the knot of being, situated...several centimeters below

⁸ Novalis (1992, p. 133).

⁹ Oken (1847, p. 269). Hegel objects to Oken’s as much as to Schelling’s analogies in his *Philosophy of Nature*.

¹⁰ Ponge (1992, p. 106).

¹¹ Nancy (2008, p. 13).

ground-level].”¹² This knot is, of course, the seed, which is dethroned as the originary principle, the *arkhè*, of the plant (and, thus, disseminated) both thanks to Goethe’s insight, explored in detail below, that it is but a modification of the leaf, which is a more generic part of the plant, and due to its ownmost germination that sends offshoots both downwards and upwards, burrowing deeper into the earth and emerging from obscurity toward the light. But why is the ineluctable bi-directionality of growth, striving, at once, toward light and toward darkness, significant for post-metaphysical thought inspired by plants? And what would it mean to write and think in a vegetal—if not a vegetative—state, having left one’s head behind or walking on one’s head? What is the outcome of our approximating the locus of vegetal being?

Ponge accentuates this seemingly banal fact of the plant’s double extension when he describes the act of placing oneself in the position of vegetal being: a little below the surface, and, from there, stretching up and down simultaneously.¹³ One of the most compelling reasons for desiring to be in the place of the seed is, it seems to me, that germination commences in the middle, sending offshoots up and down simultaneously, that is, begins without originating and turns the root and the flower alike into variegated extensions of the middle. Like a sentient and conscious subject who always finds herself in the midst of something that has already begun outside the sphere of her memory and control, the plant is an elaboration on and from the midsection devoid of a clear origin. Starting from this fecund and self-proliferating station, both extremities of plants are “beheaded”; the root and the flower are neither essential, nor radically indispensable, nor do they stand for the spiritual culminations of vegetal being. Let us already call this phenomenon by its name: dissemination, infinitely deferring the beginning as well as the end not only in the corpus of Derrida’s writings but already in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* (“The first seeds of all organic formation are themselves already products of the formative drive.”¹⁴) Finally, the act of beheading does not privilege, however negatively, the amputated organ, which is put on the par with the highest as well as the lowest, the flower and the root, due to the ambiguity of the French idiom used by Ponge. The head, in sum, loses its transcendental privilege.

Before assessing the full extent of the implications arising from the transvaluation of vegetal spatiality, it is necessary to draw a sharp distinction between the middle and the center. As soon as the one is identified with the other, the head of the plant, or of any being whatsoever, is reinstated in its majestic, sovereign place, even where it does not occupy the uppermost position in the vertical configuration of the organism. In the history of philosophy, the allure of both direct and inverse homologies between the plant and the human has depended, largely, on the upright “posture” of the plant, which replicates human bearing in space much more faithfully than does the position of a quadruped animal. Plato’s concern with the “uprightness” of the human body had to do with its literal and moral standing, ensured as long as it was not permitted to deteriorate to the status of the beast.

¹² Ponge (1992, p. 109).

¹³ Ponge (1992, p. 109).

¹⁴ Schelling (2004, p. 47).

Whereas in animals that crawl or walk on all fours, the head is on the same level as the rest of the body, in humans it is the highest point of corporeality and, thus, the closest to the ethereal sphere of Ideas. The head's physical position, moreover, confirms its authority as a center of intelligence, the sovereign decision-making organ, and the radial point from which everything properly human emanates. But, assuming that something else (another organ or faculty) were pinpointed as essential, the center, from which the rest would derive, would be reconstituted elsewhere in the body. Not just an isolated point, it ultimately englobes the entire organism, as in Bergson's description of the "system of nervous elements stretching between the sensory organs and the motor apparatus" and forming the "center" of animal evolution.¹⁵ The middle, on the other hand, is often de-centered, constituted from a series of shifting and contingent intersections (in Ponge's words, "knots") of the here and now. It is this middle place, not a fictitious inaccessible origin, that holds the promise of growth and proliferation, dispersed from the moment of its germination, unable either to gather itself into a unity or to orient itself in a single direction. In its sheer materiality and organicity, the plant interferes with the metaphysical fixation on the One.

The middle pertains to a non-totalizable synthetic unity, such as the plant, spanning divergent milieus outside of it: the earth and the sky, darkness and light, the moisture of the soil and the dryness of crisp air. Eluding Canguilhem's definition of the living—"To live is to radiate; it is to organize the milieu from and around a center of reference, which cannot itself be referred to without losing its original meaning"¹⁶—vegetal being is de-centered in its milieu, which it neither organizes nor opposes. Put in traditional philosophical terms favored by Hegel, plants function as the first material mediations between the concrete universality of the earth and the purely abstract, ideal Being of light,¹⁷ although they do not synthesize that which they mediated. Entirely oriented toward exteriority in their diremption toward polar opposites, they are the media of proto-communication between diverse physical elements. They cover the earth without either dominating or conquering it, and they seek their "place in the sun" without depriving others of theirs, notwithstanding the empirical evidence supplied by the exuberance of the jungle and everything Nietzsche has to say on the subject of the vegetal form of the will to power. The ethics of plants, *proceeding from their own standpoint*, will perennially return to this middle place literally suspended between heaven and earth.

In Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," a unique product of human *tekhne*—say, the Greek temple—was capable of gathering *phusis* into a "simple manifold" of the sky above it, the cliff on which it was situated, and the violent sea underneath it. The plant, in turn, materially articulates and expresses the beings that surround it; it lets beings be and, from the middle place of growth, performs the kind of dis-closure of the world in all its interconnectedness as the one Heidegger attributes to the human Dasein. The tree is already a "clearing of being," even if it grows in the thickest of forests, for, in its openness to the earth and the sky, to the

¹⁵ Bergson (2005, p. 102).

¹⁶ Canguilhem (2008, pp. 113–114).

¹⁷ Hegel (2004, pp. 323–324).

closed and to the open simultaneously, it brings these elements into their own and puts them in touch with each other, for the first time, as that which lies below and that which stretches above. Similarly, in a peculiar mediation between the living and the dead, caressing the dead with its roots and obtaining nourishment from them, the plant makes them live again. Vegetal afterlife, facilitated by the passage, the procession of the dead (including the decomposing parts of the plants themselves), through the roots to the stem and on to the flower, is a non-mystified and material “resurrection,” an opportunity for mortal remains to break free from the darkness of the earth. Thanks to the plant, fixed in place by its roots, dead plants, animals, are humans are unmoored from their “resting places”; they travel or migrate. Unlike the crypt, supposed to ensure (though it never lives up to its mission) that its inhabitant would be kept in place, surrounded by inorganic matter, the grave covered by a flowerbed is always already opened, exceeding the domain of the earth and blurring the boundaries between life and death. “Flowers, culled with the dead, always for covering the coffin...”¹⁸.

2 Vegetal heteronomy

Gathering the aspects of *phusis* that, by far, exceed the plant in their dimensions, a vegetal being remains radically dependent on its milieu. Its heteronomy is, thus, a crucial component of vegetal anti-metaphysics. (As la Mettrie puts it in slightly derogatory terms, “An appropriate image of a plant is an infant clinging to its nurse’s nipple, sucking incessantly. Plants are sucklings of the earth, and they leave the breast only when they die”¹⁹). That plants are less self-sufficient than animals is a conclusion reached by the author of *De Plantis*, who finds it inconceivable that “...the plant would be a more perfect [*teleioteron*] creature than the animal.” “How could this be,” asks pseudo-Aristotle, “when the animal requires no outside action in its own generation but the plant does, and needs this at certain seasons of the year? For the plant needs the sun, a suitable temperature and even more the air...The beginning of its nutrition is from the earth and the second beginning [*arkhè hetera*] of its generation is from the sun.”²⁰ The imperfection of the plant is attributed to its incapacity to determine itself; in other words, it is due to the plant’s rootedness outside of itself, in the external—*exōterikou*—element on which it depends. Indeed, even here the root is bifurcated, split between the plant’s nutritive origination from the earth and “the other origin,” *arkhè hetera* (hence, a certain kind of *anarchy*), hidden in the generative power of the sun. Vegetal life is not autotelic; it does not contain its “cause” in itself, in contrast to the animal sheltering the principle of its own animation. The displacement of causality to the externality of the sun, the soil, moisture, and air still espouses what might be called

¹⁸ Derrida (1986, p. 17).

¹⁹ La Mettrie (1994, p. 85).

²⁰ Aristotle [attributed] (1963, pp. 817a, 18–26). The plant, for the author of *De Plantis*, is literally rooted outside of itself: “But all herbs whether they grow above the earth or in it, depend on one of these five conditions; seed, moisture from water, a suitable soil, air and planting. These five one might say are the roots of plants [*rizai phutōn*]” (1963, pp. 827a, 2–7).

“the metaphysics of the element,” which has marked ancient Greek philosophy already (and especially) in its pre-Socratic variations. Such displacement, nonetheless, makes an invaluable contribution to the post-metaphysical critique of the concept of causality, insofar as it, first, disperses a unitary cause among different elements, and, second, accentuates a group of beings—the plants—that are not self-determined in a sovereign fashion and that do not assert themselves over and against the environment in which they are situated. It is this re-conceptualization of Being, commencing from the world of vegetal beings, that promises an alternative approach to the “end” of metaphysics, which forms the unsurpassable horizon of philosophy *and* of concrete life in the twenty-first century.

The plant does not stand under the injunction, ostensibly directed to all types of subjectivity, to cordon itself off from its surroundings, to negate its connection to a place, so that it could become itself as a result of this oppositional stance. Rather, if vegetal being is to be at all, it must remain an integral part of the milieu wherein it grows. Its relation to the elements is not domineering: the receptivity of the flower and of the leaf is expressed in how they turn their widest surfaces to the sun,²¹ while the root imbibes everything it encounters in the dark recesses of the soil in which it is anchored, be it nutrients or poisonous substances. To be sure, such hyperbolic attribution of passivity to vegetation ought to be moderated with the recent scientific findings that shed light on the way plants defend themselves from predators, for instance, by bathing the larvae of insects deposited on their leaves in toxic chemicals, and actively adapt to changes in their environment. It would be, thus, more accurate to describe plants as neither passive nor active, in that these behavioral attitudes are but human projections onto the world around them.

Western philosophers of subjectivity not only associated vegetal life with a passive comportment but also regarded it as deficient, since it did not open the space of freedom to decide on the course of action, if not the freedom to act in general. In the context of the post-metaphysical rethinking of ethics in the writings of Levinas and Derrida, however, such radical passivity in excess of the opposition between the active and the passive, such exposure to the other, which is typical of plants and which can only be affirmed well in advance of *our* conscious ability to utter a decisive “yes” or “no,” denotes the ethical mode of subjective being. Opening themselves up to the other, ethical subjects allow the plant in them to flourish. Post-metaphysical ethics is vegetal.

Nowhere is the tacit philosophical disagreement on the subject of receptivity as evident as in the divergence of the Levinasian ethics of alterity from the Hegelian emphasis on self-relatedness. The two millennia separating pseudo-Aristotle and Hegel did not see any substantial changes in the philosophical approaches to plants attesting to the fact that the conceptualization of vegetal being has been always accomplished in the shadow of metaphysics. As though echoing the ancients, Hegel deplores the non-oppositionality of plants and their absolute dependence on external conditions, the determination of their movement by “light, heat, and air.”²² Although he falls short of stating that plants are devoid of selfhood (*Selbstischkeit*),

²¹ Miller (2002, p. 17).

²² Hegel (2004, p. 307).

the German thinker terms the vegetal self “negative,” because “the plant is not yet self-related,” because, that is, the “outer physical self of the plant is light towards which it strives in the same way that man seeks man.”²³ The metaphysics of the element is at its most potent in this assertion exemplifying the sort of heliotropism that, as Derrida explained, has plagued philosophy already in Plato’s analogy of the sun and the Good.²⁴ To the plant’s striving toward light corresponds an equally metaphysical feature of the animal, namely, the will: a numinous, withdrawn, interior impulse, directed to a specific object of action. Or, as Bergson states, “...we doubt whether nervous elements, however rudimentary, will ever be found in the plant. What corresponds in it to the directing will of the animal is, we believe, the direction in which it bends the energy of the solar radiation...”²⁵ At the same time, the lesson Hegel draws from the plants’ quasi-religious striving toward (worship of) the light of the sun internally undoes heliotropism, and, indeed, the model of self-centered subjectivity. As opposed to human subjects, who attain their subjecthood thanks to a return to themselves across the terrain of otherness they have traversed, the vegetal self is formed, in the absence of self-reflection or self-feeling,²⁶ in and as a unidirectional, infinite movement toward its other, the light. What is denounced as “bad infinity” in Hegel’s verdict, however, is the very ethical infinity that resists the logic of totalization in Levinas. The infinite relation to the other without return to oneself is the cornerstone of Levinasian ethics advocating the substitution of the appropriative model of subjectivity with the receptive orientation to the other. The plant embodies, *mutatis mutandis*, this approach to alterity, in that it tends toward exteriority, which it does not dominate, with every fiber of its vegetal being. Its heteronomy is symbolic of Levinas’s quasi-phenomenological description of the subjectivation of the I in an ethical relation to the other.

While the plant is an integral part of its surroundings, in *Totality and Infinity*, the ethical subject sets itself apart from the element in a separation meant to establish its psychic interiority, whence the movement toward the other will commence. Despite the prevalence of the language of spatiality here (interiority/exteriority, separation, etc.), the *sine qua non* of ethical subjectivity involves a temporal, not a spatial dimension of existence, in that the relation to the other is diachronic in its unfolding between the time of the I and that of the other. In contrast to time, space is the domain of sameness, a relentless contiguity where differences are superficial and merely quantitative. But isn’t spatiality, precisely, the exclusive province of vegetal life? Given that the plant is not separate from its environment, both Hegel and Levinas will find it questionable that it could be related to alterity at all; at best, Hegel will admit that “its [the plant’s] other...is not individual, but what is

²³ Hegel (2004, p. 306).

²⁴ “Unceasingly, unwillingly, we have been carried along by the movement which brings the sun to turn in metaphor; or have been attracted by what turned the philosophical metaphor to the sun. Is this flower of rhetoric (like) a sunflower? That is—but this is not exactly a synonym—analogous to the heliotrope?” Derrida (1985, p. 250).

²⁵ Bergson (2005, p. 93).

²⁶ Hegel (2004, p. 309).

elementally inorganic”²⁷ and, therefore, what is other to life itself. The non-individuation of the vegetal self is reflected in the non-singularization of its “elementally inorganic other.” The exigencies of individuation, which is foreclosed for the plant, constitute a metaphysical foundation for relationality and ethics.

Similarly, the insistence on separation in Levinas is, I claim, a vestige of the theologico-metaphysical tradition (it is hardly surprising that “radical separation” crystallizes in the section of the book titled “Metaphysical Desire”), which presupposes that, phenomenologically, experience starts with a free and autonomous subjectivity oblivious to its heteronomous provenance. Levinas wants to demonstrate how extreme egoism is unsustainable and how it opens the I to the other. But, *concesso non dato*, shouldn’t an ethically receptive subject forgo, as its incipient moment, the very principle of appropriation and the view of subjectivity as a hidden repository or as a storehouse of experience, if it is to be genuinely generous? Vegetal life is capable of this not only because it is bereft of interiority but also because, as pruning paradoxically exemplifies, the more the plant loses, the more it grows. Proliferating from pure loss, plants offer themselves with unconditional generosity. Silently, they extend themselves in space, exposing their vegetal bodies in utter vulnerability to being chopped off or plucked, harvested or trimmed. Ethical humanism will interpret such selflessness as an unattainable ideal only if the possessive model of subjectivity is, ultimately, undisturbed by the critique of metaphysics. But, as soon as ethics sheds its humanist camouflage, the subject will join plant life in a self-expropriating journey toward the other.

3 Interlude: The meaning of plants

The other remnants of metaphysics in Levinas’s *oeuvre* revolve around his prioritization of speech over writing (criticized by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics”) as a responsible and ethical mode of addressing the other. While speech, along with the modulations of the breath that produce it, is offered to the other, such that the speakers are not given a chance to hide, to dissimulate themselves behind the words they utter, the voice—or, more precisely, hearing-oneself-speak—is coded as the ideal medium of subjectivity, wherein it coincides with itself in an auto-affective key following the philosophical genealogy traceable from Husserl back to Hegel and Aristotle. The plants, on the other hand, are voiceless and, consequently, cannot address the other. However obvious Ponge’s almost phenomenological description in “Fauna and Flora” might appear to be, it is philosophically noteworthy that “they [the plants] have no voice,” *ils n’ont pas de voix*.²⁸ They can, certainly, make sounds in conjunction with the elements, as is the case with the wind passing through the reed or a bamboo grove, but the silence of vegetation is unbreakable, though it does not keep anything back, does not conceal anything, because the possibility of speaking is foreign to it. The muteness of plants puts up insurmountable resistance to the mechanism of subjective self-idealization

²⁷ Hegel (2004, p. 308).

²⁸ Ponge (1994, pp. 68–9).

permitting the subject to be present before itself in the closest proximity of hearing itself speak. The plant's non-coincidence with itself is an effect of its absolute silence.

Vegetal life expresses itself otherwise, without resorting to vocalization. Aside from communicating their distress when predators are detected in vicinity by releasing airborne chemicals, the plants, like all living bodies, articulate themselves spatially: in a body language free from gestures, "they can express themselves only by their postures [*ils ne s'expriment que par leurs poses*]." ²⁹ In using the word "language" to describe vegetal self-expression in all its spatialized materiality, I am not opting for a metaphor. What I propose, instead, is that contemporary philosophy include the plants in the tradition of treating language neither as a means of communication, nor as something exclusively human, the tradition that, in Heidegger's "totality-of-significations" and in Benjamin's "language of things" or "the language as such," is attuned to the spatial relations and articulations between beings, whether animate or inanimate. Plant-thinking must, henceforth, rely on this material signification devoid of conscious intentionality and coinciding with the very phenomenality—the particular modes of appearance—of vegetal life.

If the postures of plants are meaningful in the strict sense of expressivity conveyed by Ponge, then it is possible to appeal to their embodied, material, and finite sense as a counterpoint to the ideality of meaning endorsed, for example, in Husserlian phenomenology. Recall that it is with reference to the destructibility of an actual tree, juxtaposed to the noematic perceived tree, that Husserl endeavors to formulate the metaphysical sense of sense in *Ideas I*: "The *tree simpliciter*, the physical thing belonging to Nature, is nothing less than this *perceived tree as perceived* which, as perceptual sense, inseparably belongs to perception. The tree *simpliciter* can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements, etc. But the sense—the sense of this perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence—cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties." ³⁰ Husserl takes it for granted that the tree *simpliciter* is, as such, meaningless and that, in its pure ideality, meaning is metaphysically safe and sound, insulated from empirical accidents and phenomenological reductions, devastating fires and careful "bracketings." The ideality of sense that outlives the destruction of its referent is a corollary to "pure consciousness" that survives the hypothetical annihilation of the world. But what if these assumptions are unwarranted? What about the materiality of the tree's sense, which merges with its being? Can it "burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements, etc.?" An affirmative answer to these questions will envisage non-metaphysical meaning that will be destroyed along with its "bearer." It will assert that vegetal life is saturated with meaning in all its spatiality, materiality, and finitude, and, conversely, that the loss of every tree—to deforestation or to other causes—implies the passing away of meaning bound up with the particular spatial extension of that very tree, to which we can no longer be transcendently indifferent. Just as, in the thought of Levinas and Derrida, the death of each singular human subject is nothing less than "the end of the world" (phenomenologically and

²⁹ Ponge (1994, pp. 70–1).

³⁰ Husserl (1983, p. 212).

ethically understood), so the uprooting of every tree signals the obliteration of the meaning that it *is* in the extended materiality of its posture.

The Husserlian tree *simpliciter* means *too little* (indeed, nothing at all) before the act of sense-bestowal that, at the same time, holds for it the quasi-dialectical promise of resurrection and immortality as it turns into the perceived, the remembered, or the signified tree. This is why the meaningless material plant must be sacrificed to its ideal counterpart, in which it gains eternal life. A human being, too, may descend to the meaningless of the plant, especially when he produces *too much* meaning, in excess of the confines of formal logic: “For such a man [refusing to reason and not respecting the principle of non-contradiction], as such, is seen already to be no better than a mere vegetable [*homoios gar phutōi*]”.³¹ Whether or not such humans succumb to the impulses of the vegetal part of their souls, the refusal to reason is here detected in holding fast to the “possibility of the same thing being and not being” (snubbing the principle of non-contradiction), that is, in the refusal to master and eliminate the equivocality of meaning. Derrida’s take on this passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* emphasizes how metaphysical thought, vigilantly warding off the slightest hints of metaphoricity, gets carried away when it comes to a subtly de-naturalized natural metaphor of the plant: “And such a metaphorical vegetable (*phutos*) no longer belongs completely to *physis* to the extent that it is presented, in truth, by *mimesis*, *logos*, and the voice of man.”³² (Decades later, Derrida will apply the same argument to the exemption of the metaphor of the beast from the order of nature, given that the attribute of *bêtise*—stupidity, folly, foolishness: from the French *la bête*, the beast—cannot be used to describe the animal, only the human.³³) A dangerous metaphoricity has already percolated into the comparison—undertaken in all seriousness within the confines of a metaphysical discourse wholly committed to formal logic—of an unreasonable human being to a vegetable “obscurely and absolutely separated from *logos*.”³⁴ The metaphor of the plant, used as a weapon against metaphorical thinking, announces the self-undermining and the internal collapse of Aristotle’s dream of univocal meaning. This, in turn, leads us back to the paradoxes of the tree *simpliciter*, which is not only an example of “a physical thing belonging to Nature” but also a counter-example to Husserl’s phenomenological argument, in that it is, *as such*, something meant and theoretically objectified—in other words, “a physical thing belonging to Nature”—to the degree that, despite its ostensible referential exteriority, it is posited in and manipulated by a philosophical discourse. Its “simplicity” or absolution from the order of signification is never simple enough and never complete; something of meaning always burns up along with the tree *simpliciter*.

Although Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa still attributes a kind of metaphysics to vegetal life, his is a metaphysics that is no longer anthropocentric, that does not revolve around symbolic meaning, but, rather, revels in the “*clara simplicidade/E saúde em existir/Das árvores e das plantas* [clear simplicity/And health in the

³¹ Aristotle (1933, 1006a, 12–5).

³² Derrida (1985, p. 249).

³³ Derrida (2009, p. 147ff).

³⁴ Agamben (1999, p. 231).

existence/Of the trees and of the plants].”³⁵ Alberto Caeiro, the pastoral literary persona (heteronym) of Pessoa, is highly attuned to the otherness of vegetal meaning in his refusal to consider the absence of conscious thought as the index of absolute meaninglessness. As though anticipating the impossible desire of Francis Ponge, who wishes to lose his head, emulating the headless plant, he praises the metaphysics of plants: “Metaphysics? What metaphysics do those trees have?/To be green and lush and to have branches/And to bear fruit at the right time.../But what better metaphysics than theirs,/The metaphysics of not knowing for what they live/And of not knowing that they do not know it?”.³⁶ Much more is at stake here than the conventional ascription of innocence to vegetal life would intimate; what Caeiro hints at is the non-privative dimension of a thought-free way of being and a corresponding indication that thinking itself is a defect (if not a disease), an anomaly within the order of the existence of plants. Implicitly concurring with both Nietzsche, for whom empty contemplation is an illness, and with Heidegger, who supports the view that the theoretical attitude is a sickly product of a failure in the practical comportment of the ready-to-hand, the author of these lines affirms the disconnect between life and knowledge, between existence and the brooding about its meaning or purpose (“The metaphysics of not knowing for what they live/and of not knowing that they do not know it”). The spatial and practical vegetal meaning bereft of consciousness completes the de-centering of metaphysics in plant life and parades the lack of inner essence that would be hidden behind the surface level of its phenomenal appearances. Despite the Socratic pronouncement in *Phaedrus* that “the trees are not willing to teach [us] anything,”³⁷ what we can learn from the plants’ “clear simplicity” is an inherently superficial mode of existence, which we, humans, are rarely satisfied with, even though we are absorbed in it during a significant portion of our lives.

4 Essential superficiality: Toward a model of vegetal being

We have already touched upon the essential superficiality of plants with regard to their exteriority (to themselves) and sheer phenomenality. Metaphysically speaking, vegetal life is superficial because it does not boast a deep essence, that is, because a plant may cast off virtually any of its parts without being fatally affected by this loss. The author of *De Plantis* was the first to remark upon this puzzling behavior of various parts of plants, such as the leaves and the fruit, that “often fall off from them even without being cut off.”³⁸ But pseudo-Aristotle refrains from defining the entire vegetal being as essence-free, instead highlighting the parallel between these “detachable” parts, which may be lost without the infliction of damage upon the rest of the living being, and the equally superfluous nails and hair of human beings. His thinking is promptly brought back into the familiar metaphysical fold (and plunged

³⁵ Pessoa (1969, p. 206).

³⁶ Pessoa (1969, p. 207).

³⁷ Plato (1914, p. 230d).

³⁸ Aristotle [attributed] (1963, pp. 318b, 10–15).

into the dimension of depth) as soon as it contemplates the role of the root as “the source of life,” *aitian zōēs*, and of the stem, in its erection out the ground, as “comparable to the stature of man.”³⁹ Periodically shedding its leaves does not present a danger to the continued life of the plant that, actually, survives the harsh seasons thanks to this sacrifice. But detach it from its vital source (or “cause”) and it will immediately perish: such is the assumption of the early vitalist essentialism, which inaugurates the view that both the plant and the animal are organisms, or living totalities, where the organic parts are subordinated to the demands of the whole.

It is an achievement of Derridian deconstruction to have revealed that the detachable, “prosthetic,” and ostensibly superfluous supplement is the hidden, disavowed source of that which it supplements. The leaf is, perhaps, the very embodiment of supplementarity, because it is something superadded onto the trunk and the branches, more often than not on a temporary basis. In Goethe’s *The Metamorphosis of Plants* the logic of the deconstructive supplement plays itself out *avant la lettre*, precisely, when it comes to the status of the leaf in the development of plants. According to Goethe, metamorphosis, change of form, the process of becoming-other, is not merely one of the features of vegetal life; it *is* this life itself. The primacy of change over the stability and identity of the plant is deduced in this influential botanical monograph from the permutations of the leaf, whose thickening contraction yields a seed, whose refinement turns it into a petal, and whose “greatest expansion” accounts for the emergence of a fruit.⁴⁰ The depth of the root, the fruitfulness of the seed, the thickness and overwhelming size of a tree trunk are all construed in terms of the rhythmic vacillations of the leaf that successively experiences phases of expansion and contraction. Like human corporeality, the plant’s body is all skin, a mere surface, sometimes thin to the point of transparency, sometimes thick and dense, as though in commemoration of the inorganic nature, to which it stays relatively close.⁴¹ The mystical aura of the seed taken to be an originary principle—suffice it to mention, in this respect, the pre-Socratics’ fascination with *spermata* and Ovid’s haunting description of the originary chaos as full of “warring seeds [*discordia semina*] of ill-matched elements”⁴²—is debunked in keeping with the overturning of causal relations (the effects become the causes of the cause) and of priorities (the first becomes second, and the second—first) in the logic of supplementarity. That which is the most superficial finally takes the place of the most fundamental: the leaf usurps the originary status of the seed.

When Goethe resolutely argues for “the fruitfulness hidden in a leaf”,⁴³ he embraces the absolute superficiality of vegetal being and adds a new twist to the cryptic statement of St. Thomas Aquinas, *vita in plantis est occulta*, “life is hidden

³⁹ Aristotle [attributed] (1963, pp. 319a, 23–25).

⁴⁰ Goethe (2009, p. 65).

⁴¹ “Yet it [the body] is a skin, variously folded, refolded, unfolded, multiplied, invaginated...” [Nancy (2008, p. 15)].

⁴² Ovid (1984, I, 9).

⁴³ Goethe (2009, p. 67).

in plants.”⁴⁴ The mystery of this life is not buried in the deep recesses of the seed or of the earth, for it resides in the very figure of the surface, of that which is given to sight and turned toward light, the figure of being-exposed, the leaf. Yet, the anti-metaphysical bend of Goethe’s text is eclipsed by a lamentable imposition of identity onto the plant, whose differences in form are reduced to a self-same substratum underwriting them: “The process by which *one and the same organ* appears in a variety of forms has been called *the metamorphosis of plants*.”⁴⁵ And, again: “Earlier I tried to make as clear as possible that the various plant parts developed in sequence are intrinsically identical despite their manifold differences in outer form.”⁴⁶ A crystal-clear distinction between the inner and the outer, the one and the many, the unapparent identical core, on the one hand, and the appearance of “manifold differences,” on the other, recuperates the organizing set of metaphysical dichotomies that suffocate vegetal life by virtue of this life’s philosophical misappropriation. Even the displacement of the origin as a result of the relegation of fruitfulness to the leaf is derailed by Goethe’s metaphysical zeal. Having developed, in theory, the primal form of the plant, he embarked on a search for the archetypal plant, *Ur-Pflanz*, meant to supply the empirical proof for his theory. Thus, in a letter from Naples dated “May 1787,” Goethe confided in Herder: “The primal plant is going to be the strangest creature in the world, which nature itself will envy me.”⁴⁷ It is going to be, more concretely and in an eerie anticipation of genetic manipulation based on the DNA structure, an actually existing generic blueprint of plant-being, from which still nonexistent plant varieties would be derived.

The idea that vegetal difference is inessential migrated from Goethe’s theory of metamorphosis to Hegel’s dialectical enunciation of plant nature. Hegel recognizes that, though an organic being, the plant is not an organism, because, in it, “the *difference of the organic parts* is only a superficial *metamorphosis* and one part can easily assume the function of the other...In the plant, therefore, the members are particular only in relation to each other, not to the whole; the members themselves are in turn wholes, as in the dead organism where in sedimentary strata they are also external to one another.”⁴⁸ The difference of plant parts is no difference, one predicated on “a superficial *metamorphosis*” that overlays the undifferentiated substratum of nascent organic life still in a tight grip of the inorganic mineral world. But neither does the language of sameness befit vegetal life, since the plant falls short of positing its self-identity in a mediated relation to itself as other. At the very least, the inapplicability of either of the two terms should have given the philosopher a pause and should have been taken as a clue for the fact that metaphysical and dialectical categories do not pertain to this kind of life lived on the hither side of the distinction between the same and the other. Dialectically speaking, the externality of parts in relation to the whole and to each other engrains death itself into vegetal life, as Hegel’s analogy demonstrates. The plant, for Hegel, is a

⁴⁴ Aquinas (1952, *Q.LXIX*, A2).

⁴⁵ Goethe (2009, p. 6), emphasis added.

⁴⁶ Goethe (2009, p. 56).

⁴⁷ Goethe (1962, p. 310).

⁴⁸ Hegel (2004, pp. 303–304).

novice in the sphere of the living entirely identified with the organicity of a self-proliferating totality.

If the plant is not an organism consisting of interdependent organs, it may not be conceived as a totality or as a differentiated whole. Its parts, likewise, transcend the distinction between “part” and “whole”; in their externality to one another, they are both members of a plant and independent entities in their own right. Unbound from the logic of the totality, they constitute a provisional unity of multiplicities (“the plant,” in an apt expression of a nineteenth century French botanist Brisseau-Mirbel, “is...a collective being”⁴⁹), a loose community that is not interlaced with the ironclad ties of an inner essence. The plant, whose forms and functions are fluid, is not an organism but what Deleuze and Guattari term a “body without organs,” a mode of dis-organization, “a pure multiplicity of immanence.”⁵⁰ It is astonishing, therefore, that a particular plant—the tree—is singled out by the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* as the model of a hierarchical arrangement of multiplicities and of the differences between products and reproductions (tracings), originary and derivative elements: “The tree articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like the leaves of a tree.”⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari seem to forget that the leaf is neither an organ of a larger whole, nor a derivation from the original stem-root structure. In and of itself, it is an infinitely iterable and radically egalitarian building block of the tree, for it is, at once, the source, the product, and the miniature reproduction of vegetal being, from which it may always fall away. Wreaking havoc in the differential valuations of copies *versus* originals and enacting a veritable anarchy, the plant’s “body without organs” is not subject to a hierarchical organization. It maintains conceptual horizontality even in the tree’s spatial verticality.

After this brief detour, let us return to the Goethe-Hegel nexus. The most significant disagreement between the two German authors, when it comes to the philosophy of plants, pertains to the status of sexual difference (and, more generally, organic differentiation) in vegetal life. For Goethe, the metamorphosis of plants is a teleological development, in the course of which the leaf is gradually refined and even “spiritualized” in its transformation into the flower, a garland surrounding its sexual organs. “By changing one form into another,” notes Goethe, “it [the plant] ascends—as on a spiritual ladder—to the pinnacle of nature: propagation through two genders.”⁵² The *telos* of the leaf, in its literal and metaphorical journey out of the coarseness of the seed and the darkness of the soil toward the vast airy expanse, toward the light, and toward the objectification of the luminous in the colorful fragility of the flower, is individuation and sexual difference serving as the basis for ontological difference between spiritless matter and actualized spirit. On this account, the plant develops sexual *organs*, while the iterations of the same—the leaf—produce qualitatively different, organically differentiated, outcomes. It is this presupposition that Hegel dismantles, arguing that the plant is unable to muster enough individuality to oppose itself to an individual of a different sex: “The

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Canguilhem (2008, p. 41).

⁵⁰ Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 157).

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 12).

⁵² Goethe (2009, p. 6).

different individuals cannot therefore be regarded as of different sexes because they have not been completely imbued with the *principle* of their opposition...”⁵³ Although sexual difference surfaces for the first time in a plant, it thereby signals a dialectical transition to what is not a plant, namely, to the animal completely imbued with sexuality that is inseparable from its entire embodied being. Of course, Hegel does not deny that pollination is a sexual mode of reproduction, but he treats this mode as redundant within the overall framework of the existence of plants: the entire vegetal “genus-process” is “on the whole, superfluous since the process of formation and assimilation is already reproduction as production of fresh individuals,”⁵⁴ so much so that the “seed which is produced in a fruit is a superfluity.”⁵⁵ What stood for the pinnacle of the plant’s spiritual development in Goethe turns out to be a superfluous appendage in Hegel’s philosophy. Despite the mediation of dialectical self-understanding through vegetal metaphors—such as the interplay between the deep essence and the appearances as a relation between the kernel and the shell—the seed of the actual plant turns into a luxurious excess, in Hegel as well as in Bergson,⁵⁶ the excess ready to be discarded by the dialectical machinery at any moment.

It is easy to forgive Hegel for his ignorance of the much later discoveries that the sexuality of plants is so complex that it is regulated by hormones—for instance, soy beans contain large quantities of phytoestrogens, similar to the human estrogen—or that the introduction of mammalian sex hormones into plants induces flowering and affects the ratio of female to male flowers.⁵⁷ What is unforgivable, nonetheless, is that his approach to vegetal sexuality condenses in itself, as though in a philosophical microcosm, the metaphysical mishandling of plants. The absence of individuality, inner differentiation, and oppositionality in vegetal being boils down, in the elaboration on the “genus-process,” to the castration of the plant incapable of accommodating sexual difference. But, in the first instance, it is this difference as such that falls prey to the knife of dialectics that simplifies the entire realm of sexuality to an oppositional relation between two sexes, thanks to which each finds the individuality proper to it. A violent dialectical reduction takes it for granted that only two alternatives exhaust the entire array of sexualities, discernable, especially, in the pre-individuated state defined by Freud in terms of the “polymorphous perversity” of the infant, and by Heidegger as the “neutrality” of Dasein. Apropos of the multifaceted sexual differences of Dasein, Derrida writes in the *Geschlecht* series: “If *Dasein* as such belongs to neither of the two sexes, this doesn’t mean that its being is deprived of sex. On the contrary, here one must think of a pre-differentiated, rather a pre-dual, sexuality—which doesn’t necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated...[but] more originary than a dyad.”⁵⁸ Multiple vegetal sexualities will reinforce the dispersed multiplicity of vegetal being that

⁵³ Hegel (2004, p. 344).

⁵⁴ Hegel (2004, p. 343).

⁵⁵ Hegel (2004, p. 348).

⁵⁶ Bergson (2005, p. 49).

⁵⁷ Janeczko and Skoczowski (2005, p. 75).

⁵⁸ Derrida (1978, p. 72).

does not adopt an oppositional stance toward its surroundings. The pre-dual sexual-ontological constitution of animals and humans is a legacy of vegetal dissemination. Just as the “neutrality” of Dasein saturates it with sexuality to the brink, overflowing the dyadic relation, so the indifference of vegetal sex life surpasses the logic of oppositionality and produces differences without regard to the exigencies of sameness.

Alluding to the heteronomy of plants, Hegel views the seed as “an indifferent thing”: “In the grain of seed [*Samenkorn*] the plant appears as a simple, immediate unity of the self and the genus. Thus, the seed, on account of the immediacy of its individuality, is an indifferent thing; it falls into the earth, which is for it the universal power.”⁵⁹ We might add that the seed, entrusted to the randomness of chance and the externality of its medium (the earth), maintains an ineliminable possibility of being wasted, spread, or spent for nothing, the possibility that is indicative of its freedom. But before the fall of the Hegelian seed into the earth, the plant’s lack of individuality is cast in terms of the “simple, immediate unity of the self and the genus.” Given that the seed’s self, relegated to the universality of the element and of light, is always external to itself, this unity is, at the same time, a disunity, a double indifference of the light and the earth to the seeds they nourish and of the seeds to their *self*-preservation, their own fate, since they have no intimate self to preserve. With this observation, we have stepped over the threshold of Derridian dissemination, where the breakdown of the unity and identity of the seed spells out the multiplicity it shelters even in the singular form: “...numerical multiplicity does not sneak up like a death threat upon a germ cell previously one with itself. On the contrary, it serves as a path-breaker for ‘the’ seed, which therefore produces (itself) and advances only in the plural. It is a singular plural, which no single origin will have preceded.”⁶⁰ In its singularity, the seed is already a legion: whether spilled or spread, it is both one and many. Denoting animal and vegetal modes of reproduction alike, it is, nevertheless, uniquely appropriate to *each* animal and to *each* plant. The seed’s singular plurality, adopted by Jean-Luc Nancy in his own thinking of community,⁶¹ thus, sketches out a model of justice understood as the aporetic confluence of indifferent universality (“seed” defying the boundaries between species and even kingdoms) and attention to singularity (its appropriateness to *each*).

The figure of the plant that, like a weed, incarnates everything the metaphysical tradition deems to be improper, superficial, inessential, purely exterior, turns into the prototype of a post-metaphysical being. Plants are the weeds of metaphysics: devalued, unwanted in its carefully cultivated garden, yet growing in-between the classical metaphysical categories of the thing, the animal, and the human—for, the place of the weed is, precisely, in-between⁶²—and quietly gaining the upper hand over that which is cherished, tamed, and “useful.” Despite all the abuses to which they are subjected, the weeds and, more generally, the plants will outlive

⁵⁹ Hegel (2004, p. 323).

⁶⁰ Derrida (1983, p. 304).

⁶¹ Cf. Nancy (2000).

⁶² Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 19).

metaphysics. And, from the vantage point of this survival or “after-life,” they will teach us, humans, what it means to be a subject, to be in the world, to be with others, to be.

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