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A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell

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A Philosophy of Stories Plants Tell

Plants are habitually viewed as mute living beings, existing without the possibility of self-expression. In this essay, I suggest that plants not only silently tell us something (indeed, a great deal) about themselves and the world, but also that they tell stories, rendering witness accounts about life and death, light and darkness, middles, beginnings, and ends. After correlating vegetal storytelling with the ancient *muthos* that survives the onslaught of *logos*, I concentrate on three levels of this storytelling: (1) the story of plant life; (2) stories of plant communities; and (3) stories of individual plants. Jointly, these three levels comprise the philosophy of stories plants tell.

Animal Logos, Vegetal Muthos

There are two difficulties lodged in the title of my article. One of them is quite obvious; the other—less so. If plants do not vocalize, do not express themselves through the vocal medium in speech, then how can they tell anything let alone tell stories? This is the first question that will need to be taken up through a

patient multi-level reconstruction of storytelling in plant life, plant communities, and singular plants. The second question, less evident and more disciplinary, has to do with the tensions and assumed incompatibilities between philosophy and storytelling that are something like the genetic markers of philosophy itself in its ancient Greek variation and, particularly, in Plato's texts. If philosophy unreservedly pledges allegiance to the polyvalent thing called *logos* and, moreover, if *logos* initially posits itself against *muthos* (which means, precisely, a story told, a tale), then what is the sense of "a philosophy of stories," regardless of who or what the storyteller is? Is it a proposal for reconciling old sworn enemies, *logos* and *muthos*? Does the former gain an upper hand over the latter by way of imposing its conceptual framework on narrative elements? Does the latter prevail, provided that the framework is not imposed from the outside, but is drawn immanently from the matters themselves that dictate the story's outlines, its limits, and edges?

A hint we receive from Plato is that, despite his overt critique of storytelling, the victory of *logos* over *muthos*, the establishment of *logos* in anything like disciplinary or even ideational purity in his dialogues, is glaringly incomplete. With near obsessiveness, Plato cannot stop telling stories and the story that obsesses him most is that of Socrates condemned to death by his native city. Behind the scenes of disparate dialogues, we find accumulated the unaccomplished work of mourning and a pained query, a cry really: how could this happen and why? Alongside the story of Socrates, Plato's dialogues tell us stories in a patently mythic shape, from the myth of Gyges to the myth of Er in *The Republic*, and from the myths of Phaeton and of Atlantis in *Timaeus*, to the myth of the winged soul and of Theuth in *Phaedrus*. So, *logos* is divided against itself when it comes to *muthos*: *logos* garners legitimacy from disparaging its predecessor, as far as making sense of the world is concerned, even as it relies on its denigrated counterpart to drive philosophical points home.

It would seem that we have veered too far afield, away from plants, though, in fact, we are inching ever closer to them not merely as one among many varieties of storytellers but as the living, dynamic, growing/decaying structure of storytelling, of *muthos*, to which *logos* stands in a relation of antagonism. Our textual signpost at the start of this journey will be Plato's *Phaedrus*, and within the dialogue, the analogy Socrates draws between *logos* and a living being: *zōon*. Addressing *Phaedrus*, Socrates says: "But I do think you will agree to this, that every discourse [*panta logon*] must be organized like a living being [*zōon*], with a body of its own,

as it were, so as not to be headless [*akephalon*] or footless [*apoun*], but to have a middle [*mesa te echein*] and members, composed in fitting relation to each other and to the whole." "Certainly," Phaedrus agrees (264c). The living being implicit in the Socratic description is an animal: it has a head and feet, between which the middle is slotted; its members are proportionally arranged; the difference and interrelation between the whole creature and its organs are clearly delineated. *Logos*, then, is an animal that lives, nourishes itself and others, reproduces, and survives all the better the more its animality is guaranteed and respected. Its head is the introduction, the feet correspond to a conclusion, and the middle is *contained* between the two extremes, both located between them and prevented from overgrowing the body of which it is a part.

Socrates counteracts the techno-*logos* of the sophists with his zoo-*logos*, a discourse, speech, and words that belong not to rhetorical, oratorical, and demagogic arts, but to the order of life, of breath as animation, of a living body organized in truth by a vital truth. As he notes earlier in the dialogue: "he who knows not the truth, but pursues opinions, will, it seems, attain an art of speech [*logōn ara technēn*] which is ridiculous, and not an art at all [*atechnon*]" (262c). Art is not art without life, emanating here from true seeing or a knowing ideation (*alētheian eidos*) rather than from a hunt after opinions (White 127). The technology of *logos* is, in other words, a subspecies of *logos's* zoology. That said, the bone of contention Socrates chews on with the sophists is mirrored in Plato's quarrel with the poets. *Logos* sees itself beleaguered from two sides: sophistic *technē*, on the one hand, and poetic *muthos*, on the other. While it can deploy the discourse of life against *technē*, the same strategy cannot succeed against *muthos*, rooted more deeply than *logos* itself in a life of another kind, following a different figuration or configuration. That figure, I claim, is vegetal.

Recalling in its initial part (at the head, as Plato might say) the key movements of *The Republic* (a dialogue concerned, above or below all, with acts of recollection and salvific remembrance), *Timaeus* puts into practice the consideration of *logos* as *zōon*. Before listening uninterruptedly to a remarkable cosmogonic account that makes up the bulk of the dialogue, Socrates expresses his desire to behold "beautiful animals (*zōa kala*)," whether "works of art or those truly alive" in motion (19b). He further craves seeing how the polity described in *The Republic* actually moves and lives. Instead, Socrates is offered another "feast of words," touching upon the emergence and development of the cosmos as a unique "living being, ensouled and enreasoned [*kosmon zōon empsuchon ennoun*]" (*Timaeus*

30b), a cosmic animal “embracing and containing in itself all animals [*zōa panta*]” (Plato, *Timaeus* 30c).

The passage from one discursive animal to another, from a city constituted in speech to the cosmos, is not at all smooth: cosmology is not on a par with *logos*'s zoology, of which the technology of *logos* is a subspecies because it is mediated and unfurled from its middle by myth. The narrative of *Timaeus*, the least dialogic of Plato's dialogues, nestles a story within a story within a story, as for instance, in the opening salvo, narrated by Critias, who heard it from an old man, who through a long chain of transmissions received it from Solon, who, in his turn, heard the story from an Egyptian priest in the Nile Delta. The ancient *mise en abyme* indicates that, from the beginning, the middle is what matters most; the middle takes over the places and functions of beginnings and ends, of the head and the feet, and wildly proliferates disregarding all sense of measure, proportionality, and orderly architectonics of the whole. Although Plato never outlines the vegetal features of *muthos*, we can infer them from this violation of the ground rules that govern the animality of *logos* he schematizes in *Phaedrus*.

In the quest for origins, in a discourse that “first . . . begins with the origin of the cosmos [*prōton . . . archomenon apo tēs tou kosmou geneseōs*]” (27a), the middle reigns supreme. I have maintained elsewhere (Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 63–65; Marder, *Grafts* 135–138) that the prevalence of the middle is the fulcrum of existence—both of vegetal existence and of existence's vegetality. Thinking without a head, in the absence of a principle/principal thing that would organize everything in advance, is in equal measure a description of plant-thinking and of *muthos*. It is also a thinking that, while finite, is without end, to which it would be subjected across all its stages. Its production is anarchic reproduction: copies upon copies without an original model of the modular development of branches and leaves, of stories upon stories, of the cosmic living being (animal or plant) that is itself, a copy or an image of something else (“*tonde ton kosmon eikona tinos einaī*”) (Plato 29b).

Timaeus is ambiguous on the status of his account, referring to it at times as *logos* and in other instances as *muthos*, albeit always with the proviso that the account is only a likely, not an absolutely true one, as in 29d: *eikota muthon* (Johansen 62ff). His indecision, his vacillation between *logos* and *muthos* under the common umbrella of probability, generates a hybrid discourse, reflecting the chiasm of animality and vegetality in the living being of speech, thought, cosmos, etc. Besides the untamable middle that takes over the activity of beginnings and ends,

the chimeric body of this living being is and is not its own: the self-appropriation of corporeity in *Phaedrus*, according to which animal *logos* has “a body of its own [*sōma ti echonta*],” is put in question by the “likely” nature of the account in *Timaeus* and by its shuttling between *logos* and *muthos*, animality and vegetality.

A plant, at any rate, does not lay claim to itself in a sovereign fashion, consolidating itself over and against the place it inhabits. Developing, growing, decaying, metamorphosing in and with its place, it has and doesn't have “a body of its own.” The gathering function of *logos* (from the Greek verb *legein*: “to gather,” “to assemble,” “to articulate”) bears upon its self-gathering, a self-consolidation that lends it an identity, also over and against *muthos*. Still, this is not the case of one identity confronting another: that *logos* can never cut its ties to *muthos* is a sign of animal embeddedness, and of the embeddedness of life as such, in vegetal vitality. Philosophy is incapable of isolating itself from storytelling, which is its hidden source and final message. As Jacques Derrida writes in *Dissemination*, relying on counter-incantations and stories, “philosophy consists of offering reassurance to children,” “of taking them out of childhood, of forgetting about the child, or, inversely, but by the same token, of speaking first and foremost *for* that little boy within us, of teaching him to speak—to dialogue—by displacing his fear or his desire” (122). We might as well substitute the plant for the child, including that little plant within us that remains unteachable and that teaches us how to think and to speak otherwise.

Vegetal Storytelling (1): The Story of Plant Life

We now pass from the vegetality of storytelling in the shape of *muthos* to the vegetal storytellers themselves. “Themselves” is a bit of a misleading word because it insinuates an identity where none is to be found, just as *muthos* was not another consolidated identity or self-identity confronting *logos*. The story of plant life has neither a neatly defined protagonist nor a single storyteller nor, again, an audience that would be somehow separate from its sweeping reach. Its protagonist and narrator alike are generational, flourishing, decaying, and regenerating—a cyclical movement that opens unto the vast domains of planetary time and soil composition, among other things. Everything and everyone that is participates in these cycles, joining their rotations before and often without, making a conscious decision to do so.

The story of plant life has been told lopsidedly in the West since the very inception of Western metaphysics with its domineering *logos*. Metaphysical thought separates being from becoming: being shorn of becoming comes into its own in the ideal of things, such as the Platonic ideas, that do not suffer any changes, having always been without generation and meant to be forever without decay, whereas becoming without being entails perpetual growth, its line tending to infinity. We are familiar with the most recent materialization of these narrative strands: the first yields nonbiodegradable, nondecomposable materials—for example, plastics, Styrofoam, or spent nuclear waste—that, though generated, refuse to undergo metamorphoses and to be metabolized, to decay and to decompose; the second coincides with the dreams of progress and of economic growth without contractions or downturns, without seasonal variations or different planetary phases. Broadly speaking, we (a “we” encompassing human beings and untold numbers of animal and plant species, bacteria and other microorganisms, the soil and the atmosphere, climates and ecosystems) live this variously mutilated story of plant life.

Should we turn outside the Western fold, we will notice that the *Bhagavad Gītā* (like Plato, perhaps) does speak of “the eternal, the indestructible, the immeasurable,” by which bodies are inhabited, namely *ātman*, translatable as “soul” or “self” (Chapple II.18),¹ but it does not lose sight of the cycles of birth and death, entailing the rebirth as much as the re-death of all finite creatures, whether human, animal, or vegetal.² Consoling Prince Arjuna who is reluctant to throw his army into battle, the god Kṛṣṇa observes: “For the born, death is certain; for the dead, there is certainly birth. Therefore, for this, inevitable in consequence, you should not mourn” (Chapple II.27). Mourning for the dead would be refusing to acknowledge the other, subterranean, nocturnal part of plant life, the life that has no grounds, literal or figurative, for its vitality, save for its close engagement with decay, with death whence it is replenished and reborn. The story of plant life must be told in the light and in the darkness, through light and darkness, resorting to photo-synthesis and scoto-analysis, as well as photo-poiesis and scoto-poiesis, plus the still more obscure unbound bond that exists between these apparent extremes.³ Such a story cannot be narrated exclusively in phenomenological terms by letting plant life be seen and by articulating that which is seen in *logos*. After all, *logos* can speak only in and of the light, whereas *muthos* is unafraid to descend into darkness and to allow darkness to speak—or not to speak, flourishing in near silence.

Often enough, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is able to resonate with the expressive silence of plant life. “Beings are such that their beginnings are unmanifest, their middles are manifest [*vyaktamadyāni*], and their ends are unmanifest again. What complaint can there be over this?” (Chapple II.28). Situating manifestation in the middle is placing it (and oneself) in the place of plants; whatever is manifest of beings is vegetal. But manifestation parts ways with the phenomenon that ineluctably shows itself in the light; the vegetal middle of manifestation lies between the unmanifest and the unmanifest (beginnings and ends) *and* between the manifest and the unmanifest (light and darkness, the end of the beginning and the beginning of the end). Only in this complex arrangement, in a middle that is itself in the middle, will the story of plant life unfold outside the conventional constraints of plot development, enabling us to “perceive inaction in action [*karmanīyakarma*], and action in inaction [*akarmaṇi ca karma*]” (Chapple IV.18). And the perception at stake will guide us toward a robust notion of plant behavior, even and especially in its scientific determination.

That the *Bhagavad Gītā* is exquisitely conscious and self-conscious of the vegetality of existence, glimpsed in the story of plant life, is evident in the language the work opts for. The ends that are, like the beginnings, unmanifest are the fruits, and for action to be purified (not to become metaphysically pure, but to keep circling back to the middle) its association with the ends/fruits it pursues must be cut: “He who has abandoned all attachment to the fruits of action [*karmaphalāsangam*], always content, not dependent, even when performing action, does in effect, nothing at all” (Chapple IV.20).⁴ These lines, no doubt, elucidate the workings of inaction in action, which, while performed, does nothing at all because it is not oriented to an end: the fruit. Putting aside the rather conspicuous objection that fruits, too, are products of plant life, it is possible to conclude that “the doing” in question is an imitation of this life’s conduct. To be more exact, the fruits that the *Bhagavad Gītā* discards are partial manifestations of the unmanifest, assuming that we concentrate on the end alone, while they are actually doubly unmanifest—the end and a new beginning dormant in the seeds it harbors. If so, then the fruits must be seen, in line with everything else that lends itself to sight, as the middle slotted between infinitely receding ends and beginnings.

Obdurate insistence on the middle, faithful to the story of plant life, is a recurring signature of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Those who are truly free are “liberated from the deluding power of the opposites [*dvandvamohanirmuktā*]” (Chapple VII.28), that is to say (once again, in another language), from animal *logos*, resourceless

when faced with the middling terms of vegetal *muthos*. It is also in the middle that life and death, as well as re-death and rebirth, circulate lending themselves to the senses, imagination, and ideation as the churning of the unmanifest and the manifest: “From the unmanifest, all manifestations come forth at the arrival of day; and the arrival of night, they are dissolved, at that point to be known as the unmanifest again” (VIII.18). Since, in an earlier stratum of the tradition preserved in Vedic hymns, day and night stand for life and death, the rhythmic changes of diurnal and nocturnal cycles imply much more than acts of appearing and disappearing.⁵ The story of plant life does not deviate all that much from that of day *and* night or of Uṣas, the Hindu goddess of dawn, who is both more and less than herself: plant life is life and death, the absolute obscurity of death and the day-break of rebirth, the re-deaths that occur within a life and the mutual sustenance that life and death give each other in the course of plant life.⁶

Vegetal Storytelling (2): Stories of Plant Communities

From this point onward, things get more specific, albeit not on the ladder of specificity that descends from the most general to the most particular. Already the elusive middle of plant life did not furnish a grand synthesis of universality and singularity. What it did signal was an overarching trajectory that swept plants and planets, life and death, rebirth and re-death into its midst. With plant communities, we are transported to another middle, the milieu. Which stories do fields, gardens, forests, and deserts tell? How are they articulated in—and between—the extensive and intensive senses of articulation? In what ways are they distributed between *muthos* and *logos*?

There is no one all-embracing answer to these questions because the answers are indexed to various plant communities, distinct vegetal milieus, or modes of inhabiting the middle. Plant communities are tangles of stories about interactions among plants; the collaborations and collisions of plants with bacteria, fungi, and animals; agriculture and permaculture; diets and habitats; and, less and less so, the wilderness. All this is not to mention (at least, not yet) the blurry boundaries between communities and individuals in the vegetal world, where individual plants turn out to be thriving communities and plant communities come close to a single plant, for instance, by way of sharing the same root below ground.

The story of the plant community I want to focus on in a necessarily episodic, piecemeal fashion is that of a forest. I propose that we listen to the stories forests tell not only because, once feared as places of danger and perdition, they are nowadays the most endangered of places, vanishing from the face of the earth at a catastrophic pace, but also because the philosophical concept of matter is born of or from the forest when *logos* wrests it (incompletely, mind you) from the grip of *muthos*. Still absent in Plato, this concept is formulated in Aristotle's reinterpretation of the Greek word for wood and for the woods, for timber and for the living forests: *hulē*. Let us not hurry to put the hidden history of the concept of matter in the category of intellectual *faits divers*: in theory and in practice, the ever-accelerating vanishing of forests around the planet is linked to the materiality that was conceptually teased out of them. If, as Aristotle argues in *De anima*, "matter is potentiality, while *eidōs* is actuality [*Esti d' hē men hulē dunamis, to d' eidōs entelecheia*]" (412a, 9–10), then the material potentiality that is wooden and of the woods is handed over, in advance, to the actualizing manipulations of the eidetic principle. Worse, when the hylomorphic view of reality where matter and form evolve together, coevolve, and mutually determine one another falls apart, what crops up in its place is the murderous ideality of spirit, which, carrying in itself the ancient impulse of Gnosticism, aims to purge matter as a whole, to expunge it from the world rendered fully rational, knowable and transparent. Climates no longer propitious for life are the effects of extractive/destructive industries and models of energy that themselves stem from the deranged operations of "pure" spirit.

At the same time, in the Aristotelian elaboration of matter as wooden and of the woods—in the recoding and the philosophical uptake of the common Greek word *hulē* in and by nascent philosophical discourse—the registers of life and death were scrambled not in a regrettable imprecision but in extreme faithfulness to the story of plant life. The *mélange* of dead timber and the living forest in *hulē* reflected the excess of plant life that included life and death, as the precondition for life's futurity and the promise of a regrowth or a rebirth yet to come. Another non-conceptualizable, if not counter-conceptual, excess of plant communities (not least among them, of the forest) is that, besides being vegetal, they are also fungal, microbial, and animal. The gathering-articulating procedures of *logos* go into overdrive, becoming so intense as to spill over its upper and lower, conceptual and sensory, thresholds. It is this spillage, no longer accessible to *logos*, that *muthos* picks up and works or plays with.

In all its density, impenetrability, and darkness (i.e., qualities also applicable to matter), the forest was populated, in the imagination of European populations that felt they had to win space for existence from it, with a multitude of spirits. Roman *Silvanus* and Etruscan *Selvans*, Russian *leshij*, Polish *leszy*, or Serbo-Croatian *lešij*, German “moss” or “wood” people (*Moosleute*, *Waldleute*, *Holzleute*), and Basque *Basajaun* were some of the chief guardians of the forest, assisted by nymphs, elves, dwarfs and other wonderous inhabitants of the woods. Fairytales about these and related gods and semi-divine beings were filled with terror before the unknown, before what seemed at once infinitely vast and claustrophobically enclosed, the horizonless. They were not the stories plants or plant communities told; instead, they were the alarmed and hasty constructions of fledgling cultures on edge, anxious and located at the edge of immense forests as of that which did not fit the narrow constraints of domineering reason.

Cultures that, in undeniably harsh conditions, had emerged as though pulling themselves up by their bootstraps from their resistance to the forest—cultures that had thus emerged *against* the forest—found themselves in a difficult, self-undermining predicament. According to a simple syllogism, if (1) some cultures arise against the forest and (2) there is no life without the forest, then (3) these very cultures arise against life.⁷ The predicament of such cultures has, in its scope and consequences, become global. The deserts that grow worldwide as a result of deforestation are the environments that best correspond to the arid abstraction of globality, inherited from the rarefication and dematerialization of reason.

It did not have to come to this: spirit could have been receptive to matter, feeling at home in the forest, while culture could have meant care for and cultivation of life. In effect, Rabindranath Tagore conveys in “The Religion of the Forest” how the spiritual fulfillment of those who “enter into all things [*sarvam evā viśanti*]” is experienced in the forest: “the ideal of perfection preached by the forest-dwellers of ancient India runs through the heart of our classical literature and still dominates our mind” (46). They enter (*viśanti*) into all things in the forest, letting the dark-green gateway to perfection and unity with the world (which is not and can never be *global*) tell stories about the world and about itself. With this, they take shelter (*praviśanti*) in all things. The forest and those it thus shelters grow indistinguishable from the god Kṛṣṇa, who declares to Arjuna: “I am the soul [*ātmā*], Arjuna, abiding in the heart of all beings [*sarvabhūtāśayasthitah*]; and I am the beginning and the middle of beings, and the end as well” (Chapple X.20).

“Abiding in the heart of all things,” Kṛṣṇa, the forest, and the forest-dwellers of ancient India are the breath of all; they converge in *ātman* or in *brahman*, which is “the sense of the unity of ultimate reality” (Doniger 129). That is what or who speaks, what or who tells stories when forests speak.⁸

The storytelling of the forest is the account that *ātman* or *brahman*, the breath of being or the soul of the world, gives of itself to itself. It is the exhalation and inhalation prior to any utterance, which may or may not ensue. We, too, can be privy to the story of the forest, provided that through, in, or with it we abide in the heart of all beings, in the middle unconcerned with beginnings and ends, in *the ultimacy of the middle*. *Logos* with its penchant for a gathering articulation is not capacious enough to substitute for this dwelling; *muthos* is more expansive, mimicking perhaps the activity of *brahman*, “thought to derive from the root *br̥h* which means ‘grow’ or ‘evolve’” (Chapple 9). The semantic purview of *brahman* and of its verbal form overlaps, by and large, with that of the Greek verb *phuein*—“to grow, to appear”—which, as I have remarked throughout my writings on vegetal life,⁹ is formative of the nouns *phusis* (nature as the ensemble of everything that grows and appears in the light) and *phuton* (plant, comprehended as a growing being). The “sense of the unity of ultimate reality” is not static; it evolves, grows and decays, expands and contracts; it *is* a forest.

On the subject of the forest, Tagore shares with his readers a curious, if anthropologically questionable, observation. What he writes is worth quoting at length:

The history of the Northmen of Europe is resonant with the music of the sea . . . In the sea, nature presented herself to those men in her aspect of a danger, a barrier which seemed to be at a constant war with the land and its children. The sea was the challenge of untamed nature to the indomitable human soul . . . But in the level tracts of Northern India men found no barrier between their lives and the grand life that permeates the universe. The forest entered into a close living relationship with their work and leisure, with their daily necessities and contemplations. They could not think of other surroundings as separate or inimical. (Tagore 46–47)

The story about the forest is also the story *of* the forest: to Tagore, it is a place of immanence and, hence, of peace, while the clash of land and sea is a site of transcendence, of separation, and war. Philosophically understood, the elemental

standoff shaping Europe culminates in a fateful divide between matter and spirit, and between the signified and the signifier, whereas a lack of environmental “barriers” in Northern India would be propitious to hylomorphic development and, by implication, to hylomorphic self-signification. Within this grand scheme of things, it hardly matters that in the more deeply “continental” parts of Europe (Germany, Poland, Ukraine, Russia . . .) the forest appears all-enveloping and the sea does not show up on the elemental centerstage. Born in the experience of insular Cretan (Minoan) and later Hellenic archipelagic existence, European thought is affected along its history by that marine experience.

In her fresh interpretation of Tagore, Vandana Shiva adds democracy to the immanent peace of the forest:

The forests are sources of water and the storehouses of biodiversity that can teach us the lessons of democracy—of leaving space for others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. Tagore saw unity with nature as the highest stage of human evolution. It is this unity in diversity that is the basis of both ecological sustainability and democracy. (Shiva, in press 2023)

And so, narrated in the Indian context, which nonetheless exceeds its geo-cultural boundaries and becomes singularly universal, the community that is the forest is designated with a Greek paleonym, *democracy*. To what extent does the democratic “unity in diversity,” which Shiva envisions, rely on awareness (not necessarily of a conscious variety) of the breath “abiding in the heart of all things”? What are the shifts this configuration undergoes when it is removed and transplanted from the sea-oriented Hellenic existence to the forests of the Himalayas? Would Shiva accept the vegetal *muthos* of democracy in place of its animalistic *logos*?

Vegetal Storytelling (3): Stories of a Plant

Much of my philosophical work dedicated to vegetal life has been an attempt to listen, with rapt attention, to the story a plant would tell about human thinkers and their thought, about environmental devastation or exile, and about itself. Actually, assuming that the plant’s self is not separated from the place of its growth, whatever it tells about that place is already a phyto-biographic narrative

and, vice versa, the story of a plant about itself is a slowly developing narrative about its surroundings.

In *The Philosopher's Plant*, I paired twelve significant philosophers in the Western tradition, from Plato to Luce Irigaray, with twelve plant specimens (from a plane tree to a water lily) and let these human-vegetal assemblages tell the story of metaphysics. With plants in the foreground and at the helm of philosophical storytelling, metaphysical thought began to mutate, to change, and to metamorphose from within. Preparing the reader for what's to come, the book's preface thus stated that "*the history of what ideally does not grow, namely metaphysics, is told here from the perspective of what grows, including the very plants that have surreptitiously germinated within this history*" (Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant*, xvi). The vicissitudes of *logos* appeared in an entirely different light when they were illuminated, as well as dimmed down, by vegetal *muthos*.

The stories of plants became more personal for me in 2016, two years after the release of *The Philosopher's Plant*. That year, *Through Vegetal Being*, coauthored with Luce Irigaray, and *The Chernobyl Herbarium*, co-created with Anais Tondeur, were published. Both works contained autobiographical elements invariably mediated by plants who told the story of my life in telling theirs, from the birch that grew under the window of my apartment in Moscow to the irradiated leaves and flowers of Chernobyl, testifying to the disaster that touched me along with countless others, whether human or not. My intention was not one of reducing plants to a green-tinged lens for scrutinizing my biography. The question that preoccupied me was: at what points did the story of a plant, irreducible to sources of nourishment or of breathable air, and that of my life intersect? Seemingly contingent in character, the points of intersection conveyed something crucial about the condition of living: in some cases, shared with plants and, in others, divergent with respect to different modes of vitality. What I discovered, to give but one example, was our shared exposure to the world and to alterity, rife with promises and threats for the continuation of a fragile, finite existence. With rootedness and uprooting things are somewhat more complicated: although plants can be uprooted and transplanted elsewhere, this does not usually happen, which is why the plants that had stayed behind in each of my exiles and expatriations "have become the keepsakes of my memories, the mnemonic centers of gravity that evoke the events and even the atmosphere of my life at the time, down to minute details" (Irigaray and Marder 117).

It was also in *Through Vegetal Being* that I reminisced about a yoga teacher in Kottayam, India, who taught me the practice of slow breathing (Irigaray and Marder 132). These lessons took place shortly after dawn under a majestic banyan tree and were followed by academic seminars I gave at the Forum for Contemporary Theory. Returning to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, we encounter the *aśvattha* tree, vaguely connected to a sacred fig or a banyan, which grows out of the god Brahmā's act of creating the world. (It was under such a tree that Prince Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha.) Simultaneously a tree of life and of knowledge, the *aśvattha* is described as "having its roots above and branches below, whose leaves are the (Vedic) hymns" (Chapple XV.1). Immediately, though, this hierarchical arrangement is put in question: "Below and above [*adhaścordhvaṃ*] its branches spread, nourished by the qualities, with objects of the senses as sprouts; and below its roots stretch forth, engendering action in the world of men" (Chapple XV.2). The realms above and below merge into a single domain above-below, *adhaścordhvaṃ*, just as living and knowing, sensing-thinking and acting are different parts of the same vegetal being.

The *aśvattha* tree tells the story of the world, of its genesis and subsequent unfolding. After a hint of transcendence in the inverted division between the parts of this plant that face up and those that extend down, the story of the *aśvattha* is swathed, like Tagore's and Shiva's forest, in immanence (what I have called, translating to the best of my ability from the *Gītā*'s Sanskrit, "a single domain above-below"). And it also tells a story about approaches to the world, about ways of accessing the world in its being-world, that are surprisingly shared between Eastern and Western cosmologies. The cosmic tree is also featured in Plotinus's *Enneads*, while the spatial-spiritual inversion of roots and branches appears in Plato's *Timaeus* in relation to humans imagined as "heavenly plants."¹⁰ In its shade, diverse worlds meet.

The strange twist, however, is not the appearance of the cosmic tree across different cultural traditions, but the recommendation of the *Bhagavad Gītā* that the one on the path of liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycles of redeath and rebirth "cut this *aśvattha*, with its well-grown root, by the strong axe of non-attachment [*asañga*]" (Chapple XV.3). To be certain, the cosmic tree itself is left unharmed; one only distances oneself from it in a gradual exacerbation of the practice that required the dissociation of actions from their intended ends, or their fruits. In addition to fruits, the axe of non-attachment severs other parts of *aśvattha*, or, more precisely, severs the practitioner on the way to *mokṣa* from those parts: the

leaves, the branches, and the roots, sense objects and objects of knowing, desires and bonds tethering one to one's own limited existence. Another story dawns here, a story that the tree of the world tells in the negative—through ellipses and silences, non-appearances and non-accomplishments, not-sensing and not-knowing, step by step engulfing one's relation to the *aśvattha*—and that, on the hither side of expressive negativity, bristles with plenitude, of which nothing can be predicated.

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■ NOTES

1. Here and thereafter, the title of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is abbreviated as “BG” for citation purposes.
2. “Unlike the Hebrew and Christian conceptions of creation, the Indian concept allows for the infinity of time, and regards the universe as one of many that stretch, in cycles of creation and destruction, into the endless past, and that will stretch, in similar cycles, into the endless future” (Chapple 9).
3. Plant artist Špela Petrič astutely subtiles her performance “Confronting Vegetal Otherness” *skotopoiesis*.
4. On my analysis of an analogous idea in the theology of St. Hildegard von Bingen, consult Marder 2021.
5. I note parenthetically and with some regret over the lack of space to develop the thought further that, in the Vedas, the middle is also respected, as evinced in the figure of the goddess Uṣas, or Dawn. It is her transitional character, moving from the dark of Night to the brilliance of a new Day, that symbolizes rebirth, as in the hymn to Indra, where “[f]rom of old [*sanāt*], the two young girls of distinct forms, ever regenerating, go around heaven and earth along their courses—Night with her black, Dawn with her gleaming white shapes, progress one after the other” (RV I.62.8). The title of the *Rg Veda* is abbreviated as “RV” for citation purposes.

6. “[W]hat they [the authors of early Hindu texts, MM] feared most of all was what they called *punar mṛtyu*, recurrent death: how terrible to go on getting old and dying, over and over again. Re-death may have meant merely a series of ritual deaths within a natural lifespan, but it may have foreshadowed an actual series of rebirths and re-deaths” (Doniger 92).
7. With Luce Irigaray, I have sketched out this predicament in *Through Vegetal Being*. Refer, in particular, to Chapter 2: “A Culture Forgetful of Life.”
8. In a different context altogether, we could cite Kohn 2013.
9. See, for instance, Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant*, 47.
10. I discuss both instances in Chapters 1 and 3 of *The Philosopher’s Plant*.

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