

# Plant-Soul: The Elusive Meanings of Vegetative Life

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*In this paper, I propose an ontological-hermeneutical approach to the question of vegetative life. I argue that, though it is a product of the metaphysical tradition that from Aristotle to Nietzsche ascribes to the life of plants but a single function, the notion of plant-soul is useful for the formulation of a post-metaphysical philosophy of vegetation. Offered as a prolegomenon to such thinking about plants, this paper focuses on the multiplicity of meanings, the obscurity, and the potentialities inherent in their life.*

The very fact that the acts of the vegetative soul do not obey reason shows that they rank lowest.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

Psychologists no longer discussed vegetative activities.

—Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*

Modern readers are likely to meet all theoretical invocations of “the soul of plants” with suspicion. This is not only because it seems nonsensical to affirm the existence of the soul in any being other than human, but also because we have grown deeply mistrustful of the metaphysical and theological baggage weighing down this old-fashioned word, this paleonym: the soul. As rigorous philosophers, we are expected to have purged our thinking of such onto-theological nonsense. Whenever necessary, we ought to resort to much more neutral terms, such as the mind (used to translate the Latin *anima* even in certain English renditions of St. Augustine), subjectivity, or, again, the psyche, which, though it is the Greek word for the soul, is dignified in virtue of serving as the object of study in the field of psychology. What is going on, then, in a title and a text that articulate one of the most metaphysically loaded concepts with the least metaphysical one? It would appear that, just as references to the soul are superfluous, if not misleading, seeing that they are redolent of an outdated *Weltanschauung*, so the philosophical treatment of the flora in the age of science is unnecessary and is best left

to the practitioners of the specialized discipline of botany. And, indeed, both verdicts have a common root in the reductively rationalized approach to reality culminating in what Max Weber has called the “disenchantment of the world,” where the unquestioned priority of science goes hand in hand with a de-legitimization of everything that is empirically unverifiable. The soul and plants, the most ethereal and the most earthly entities, are, thus, united by their exclusion from the purview of respectable philosophical discourses in late modernity.

Contemporary philosophy disengages itself from these two entities and, thanks to this disengagement, sets them free. In the space of freedom and abandonment, left to their own devices, each transforms the other: the plant confirms the “truth” of the soul as something non-ideal, embodied, mortal, and this-worldly, while the soul corroborates the vivacity of the plant in excess of the reductively conceptual grasp. What is in question, then, in any retrieval of the notion of plant-soul is the very meaning of life handed over to extreme objectification and treated as though it were a plastic image of death. At the present historical conjuncture, when the wholesale transformation of all forms of vegetation into the sources of food and fuel (at any rate, into something to be burned as calories and as combustibles) proceeds at an ever-accelerated pace, it is exceptionally urgent to interpret the meanings of vegetative life—its precariousness, violability, and at the same time, its astonishing tenacity, its capacity for survival—while steering clear of its objective and definitive determination. Only upon completing the proposed hermeneutical exercise will we be able to gauge the ethical implications of our treatment and mistreatment of plants, as much as the reverberations of vegetative life in the beings called “human.”

### **The Obscurity of Vegetative Life: On Barely Perceptible Motion**

In various ways, ancient Greek thinkers associated life with motion. But are not plants defined, exactly, by their incapacity to move, by their rootedness in the earth that renders them sedentary? The initial intimation that the *tendency toward immobility*, as Bergson expresses it, does not exhaust the mode of being of plants is to be found in the etymology of “vegetation,” which leads us back to the Middle Latin *vegetabilis*, meaning “growing” or “flourishing,” the verbs *vegetare* (“to animate” or “to enliven”) and *vegere* (“to be alive,” “to be active”), as well as the adjective *vegetus*, denoting the qualities of vigorousness and activity. The word “vegetable” deserves a patently Hegelian admiration for the speculative nature of language that invests the same semantic unit with two opposed, if not mutually exclusive, senses. While the predominant usage of the verb “to vegetate” is negative, linked as it is to the passivity or inactivity of animals or human beings behaving as though they were sedentary plants, its subterranean history relates

it to the exact opposite of this privileged meaning—the fullness and exuberance of life, vigor, and activity. Vegetative activity encrypts itself in its modes of appearance by always presenting itself in the guise of passivity, which is to say, by never presenting itself as such.

At the conceptual level, despite its apparent immobility, the plant exhibits three out of four types of movement enumerated by Aristotle in *De Anima*, in that it can move by changing its state, growing, and decaying, though not by changing its position. Aristotle immediately adds that “if then the soul moves, it must have one, or more than one, of all of these kinds of movement” (406a, 14–17), thereby preparing the theoretical space for the existence of a vegetative soul. It is only astounding that plants are capable of motion if one identifies movement with nothing but change of positions in space, a presupposition analogous to the modern reduction of Aristotle’s fourfold theory of causality to efficient causes alone. That the plant “moves” in ways appropriate to its being, and that it is ensouled, harboring a psyche fit for its mode of existence, is one and the same insight. Still alive in Fichte, who refers to the soul of plants as “the first principle of movement in nature” (1970, 503), albeit a principle of movement that is entirely passive, driven from the outside, this idea has become completely opaque to the twentieth-century consciousness, out of touch with the ontology of vegetative existence. Such, then, is the first meaning of plant life: a certain manner and rhythm of movement we customarily disregard, since it is too subtle to be registered in an everyday setting by our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses.

Among several definitions of the soul Aristotle provides in *De Anima*, one of the most concise is that the soul is “the principle of animal life,” *arkhē ton zōon* (402a, 8). It is the *arkhē* of animal life in the sense of acting as its *first* manifestation and as an *authority* that organizes and commands its further development, guiding it, in the words of Plotinus, “without effort or noise” toward its ownmost flourishing.<sup>1</sup> But doesn’t this definition, consistent with the Aristotelian *entelechy*, deny the possibility of plant-soul by decisively locating the psyche in the sphere of animality? In its aftermath, the price for the continuing insistence on something like a vegetative soul is the blurring of the distinction between the categories of plants and animals, a subsumption of both under the heading of “animal life.” Or, is it the case that the plant has already wreaked havoc and anarchy in the metaphysical hierarchy by usurping an *arkhē* that does not rightfully belong to it but is proper to the animal? Aristotle, too, transgresses conceptual differentiations when he characterizes both plants and animals as “living things.” But, where the qualitative distinction is absent, a quantitative one

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1. On the double sense of *arkhē*, see Derrida (1998).

takes effect, so that plants are said to have a weaker purchase on life than animals. We will be justified in holding one of the most obvious solutions to the philosophical-taxonomical problem of the principle of vitality responsible for the devaluation of vegetative life and the transformation of the plants themselves into raw materials for animal and human consumption, a “standing reserve”—in Heideggerian vernacular—on which we unreflectingly draw in order to satisfy our needs. With the view to restoring the orderliness of metaphysics, the life of plants becomes a matter of degree: as living things, they are presumed to share more with inanimate things than with other living beings. The first manifestation of life, antecedent to its formalized “principle,” is, simultaneously, the most reified. Assuming that the plant is an animal, it is a deficient, impassive, and insensitive one, unable to change its position: “plants seem to live,” writes Aristotle, “without sharing [*metekhonta*] in locomotion or in perception” (410b, 23–24). But even this denigration contains an unexpected promise for the non-metaphysical ontology of plants. Denied the status of the first principle, vegetative life is not interpreted as the underived and, hence, fictitious pure origin of vitality, but, on the contrary, as whatever remains after the subtraction of the potentialities unique to the other genera of the soul. It is life in its bareness, inferred from the fact that it persists in the absence of the signature features of animal vivacity, and it is a source of meaning, which is similarly bare, non-anthropocentric, and yet ontologically vibrant.

The privative description of the life of plants that are even poorer in the world (i.e., more purely passive) than Heidegger’s animals, is, surely, a reaction of metaphysical thought to the vegetative excess and exuberance that escape capture and taming by philosophical conceptuality. Psychoanalytically speaking, the resourcelessness of a thought confronted with vegetation is here projected onto the very object that castrates metaphysics, spiriting the desired conceptual clarity away from it. Pseudo-Aristotle (most likely, Nicolaus of Damascus) will intensify, in *De Plantis*, the language of privation, daring to attribute to plants a lifeless soul: “But the plant does not belong to the class which has no soul, because there is some part of the soul [*meros psukhēs*] in it, but the plant is not a living creature [*zōon*], because there is no feeling in it” (316a, 37–40). The author of *De Plantis* has carried the reduction of life to its logical extreme, where shreds of the non-animal and inanimate soul remain in the plant. It is no longer a living thing but “an incomplete thing,” *ateles pragma* (316b, 6), which awaits completion in its being productively destroyed, utilized for higher human ends of nourishment, energy generation, and sheltering. To be a plant, in the scheme of *De Plantis*, is to be ontologically defective due to the position of vegetative beings close to the bottom of the teleological ladder,

but also due to the fact that they do not fully correspond to the main metaphysical categories, such as the thing or the animal. What has been translated into English as the “incompletion” of the plant is, likewise, its purposelessness, listlessness, the lack of goal or *telos*, attributable to its non-correspondence to the relevant parts of the metaphysical paradigm. Both semantic inflections of incompleteness, explaining the purported defectiveness of plants, should be examined, especially since they stand at the epicenter of the systematic devaluation of vegetative life in Western thought.

### **Obscurity Intensified: The “Weakness” of Vegetative Life**

Vegetative growth knows neither an inherent end, nor a limit, nor a sense of measure and moderation; in a word, it is monstrous. The life of the plant is a pure proliferation bereft of a sense of closure, a self-replication in another plant (or a part of plant: the difference between the individual unit and a part does not apply here) it will engender. We will have an occasion to revisit this notion of vegetative life as an increase of life when considering it through the double lens of Aristotle’s “capacities” of the vegetative soul and Nietzsche’s will to power. For now, another permutation of limitless plant growth in nineteenth-century German philosophy is particularly relevant, namely Hegel’s critique of bad infinity as a series that does not come to completion in a totality. Implicit in the second part of the *Encyclopaedia* dealing with on the philosophy of nature is the conclusion that the linearity of vegetative growth and the plant’s constitutive failure to return to itself prevent it from having anything like a soul. Self-relation and self-reference form “a circle within the soul which holds itself aloof from its inorganic nature. But, as the plant is not such a self, it lacks the inwardness which would be free” (Hegel 2004, 308). The incompleteness of the line tending to (bad) infinity without closing unto itself in the circularity of a return dooms the plant to strive toward exteriority without establishing any sort of inwardness, a quality Hegel associates with the psyche. The contrast between the ancient idea of the soul as an active principle of life and the modern view that necessarily ascribes to it a free space of interiority could not be any starker. And yet, despite this major difference, from Aristotle to Hegel, the deficiency of linear growth in comparison with the completion of a circle (celebrated by the ancient Greek thinker both with regard to the highest perfection of thought thinking itself and in reference to a lower capacity for self-feeling proper to the animal soul) has been confirmed, negatively impacting the value of vegetative life.

Plant growth is also seen as purposeless because the vegetative soul does not attain to any higher capacities other than those of endless nourishment and propagation. This means that, having been exempted from the logic of means and ends, it may be completed only from the

external standpoint of those who will impose *their* ends onto these essentially goal-less living things. The ensuing instrumental approach to plants synthesizes in itself the rationale for deforestation and the defense of forests as “the lungs of the planet,” seeing that both arguments fail to take into account vegetative life *as* life, aside from the external ends it might be called to serve. Aristotle himself would have objected to such an unabashedly instrumentalizing treatment of any ensouled being. For him, the soul is the first principle as well as the final cause, which is to say that “[i]n living creatures the soul supplies such a purpose [*telos*], and this is in accordance with nature, for all natural bodies are instruments of the soul [*psukhè's organa*]; and just as is the case with the bodies of animals, so with those of plants. This shows that they exist for the sake of the soul” (415b, 16–21). The body of a plant exists for the sake of its soul (therefore, for itself), not for *our* sake. As an instrument or an organ, it is that in which the soul sets itself to work (*ergon*), accomplishing, with more or less excellence (*arête*), the activities for which it is fit—in this case, the acts of generation, growth, and nutrition. Were one to invoke a hierarchical gradation of ends in the Aristotelian teleology and to suggest that the final purpose of plants is not exactly “final,” since they are situated near the bottom of the teleological hierarchy, such an argument would still not justify the dialectical destruction, or, literally, the consumption and consummation of the lower ends in the transition to the higher. But if one forgets, as Hegel does, about the existence of the vegetative soul, thereby reducing the plant to sheer materiality, to the case in point of spiritless and “self-less” nature, one will rationalize the destruction of its body for the sake of Spirit, which is as yet separate from this uninspired corporeality: “The silent essence of self-less Nature in its fruits . . . offers itself to life that has a self-like nature. In its usefulness as food and drink it reaches the highest perfection; for in this it is the possibility of a higher existence and comes into contact with spiritual reality” (Hegel 1979, 436–37). The life of Spirit permeates the body of the nourishing plant and elevates it on the condition that it jettison its material independence from the subject of desire and undergo a kind of productive destruction in the process of consumption. The notion of a vegetative soul becomes dialectically plausible solely when the plants, exemplifying the rest of organic and inorganic nature, have been fully appropriated by Spirit, have shed the last vestiges of their immediate existence and become ennobled as a result of this spiritual instrumentalization. Still—to return to Aristotle—no *teloi*, high or low, would have been accomplished had the vegetative soul not set itself to work in the body of plants and, to a significant extent, in our bodies *before* any other “spiritual” interventions. It is questionable, for instance, whether the sensory and cognitive capacities of the psyche that, in human beings, have been superadded to their

vegetal counterpart, are anything but an outgrowth, an excrescence, or a variation of the latter. And, assuming that the “higher” part of the soul is based upon or, better yet, emanates from the “lower,” what does it inherit from its progenitor? How, that is, does a human being derive its identity from its most mundane and inconspicuous other, namely, the plant?

The crude solution to the problem of vegetative life, interpreted as qualitatively weak and as verging on inanimate existence, forces this life into retreat, puts it on the run, and so increases the distance between philosophy and the plant. In the context of Aristotelian philosophy, the occult nature of plant life hinges on the relatively imperceptible types of movement—change of state, growth, and decay—it exhibits. St. Thomas Aquinas has Aristotle’s typology in mind when he writes in *Summa Theologica* that “[l]ife in plants is hidden [*vita in plantis est occulta*], since they lack sense and local motion, by which the animate and the inanimate are chiefly discerned” (1952, 362, *Q.LXIX, A2*). Those features that vegetation shares with inanimate things, namely, the lack of sense and locomotion, obfuscate its life processes, camouflaging vitality behind the façade of death. Soul-less, yet living, the plant seems to muddle conceptual distinctions and to defy all established indexes for discerning different classes of beings in keeping with the metaphysical logic of the “either/or.” Prior to St. Thomas, the author of *De Plantis* similarly oscillated between the sheer denial that plants were living beings and an affirmation of the essential obscurity of their life. Animal life transpires in the open, presents itself as it is, shines forth as a phenomenon (*phanera*), and appears to be plain and obvious (*prodelos*). Vegetative life, conversely, is inaccessible, encrypted (*kekrummene*), and unapparent (*emphanes*) (815a, 10–13). Its movements are so subtle that it is easy to mistake a dormant tree in the winter for dead wood, the archetype of inert matter. To raise the question of vegetative life phenomenologically, by chasing it out of its concealment and shedding light onto it, is already to violate it; to get in touch with the existence of plants, one must acquire a taste for the concealed and the withdrawn, including the various meanings of this existence that are equally elusive and inexhaustible. The fugal, fugitive mode of being characteristic of vegetative life replicates the activity of *phusis* itself, which, according to the famous Heraclitus fragment 123, “loves to hide,” *kryptesthai philei*. The cryptic life of plants stands for a metonymy of the self-veiling nature, for *phusis*, which, in its Greek derivation from the root *phuo-* and the verb *phuein* (“to generate” or “to grow out”), alludes to the world of vegetation (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 3).

The parallel between nature as a whole and the plant is a promising beginning for the philosophy of vegetative life. On Heidegger’s reading, the emergence of nature, or nature *as* emergence, as a surge

into Being, is, at the same time, its retreat, a giving withdrawal and an inexhaustible generosity.<sup>2</sup> *Phusis*, with its pendular movement of dis-closure, revelation and concealment, is yet another—though not fully ontologized—name for Being, which is and is not identical with everything that is *in* Being and the meaning of which is lost in every attempt to name it. Life and the soul, analogously, first emerge in the plant only to retreat from it following its reification, the inflation of its thingly dimension, and the forgetting of its ontological uniqueness. But, while Heidegger positivizes the negative movement of Being's withdrawal, casting it in terms of the indispensable underside of truth as un-concealment (*a-letheia*), the ancient observations concerning the encryption of life in the plant give rise to its mystifying fetishization.

Let us note that fetishism is a dangerous, albeit not unavoidable, supplement to the ontological approach to vegetative life. For the fetishist mentality, although plants bear resemblance to mere things, they engender a mysterious excess over other inanimate entities, the excess that, exceptional and miraculous within a reified order, is treated as worthy of veneration. The early religious cults of fertility represent, of course, the most unsublimated version of venerating something in the thing that makes it alive and that does not quite fit into the fully substantialized, rigid, and concrete panorama of reality. Wrapped in the covers of myth, vegetative life is rendered all the more numinous and obscure, so that its meanings are completely withdrawn, made unapparent and indiscernible. Whereas the complete phenomenalization of life leaves nothing to interpretation, because everything has been placed in the open, its fetishistic noumenalization, likewise, forbids interpretation, insofar as it completely blocks the emergence of meaning. As vegetative existence testifies, life—onto-phenomenologically conceived—is the process of coming to light that is not entirely victorious over obscurity.

In remarking that “to establish its [the plant life's] existence requires considerable research,” pseudo-Aristotle appeals to what might be called a “hermeneutics of vegetative life” as a way of tearing it out of its concealment without determining its meaning once and for all. If it is to be effective, such a hermeneutics must, on the one hand, precipitate a critique of philosophy that has forced the life of plants into retreat, exacerbating the ownmost tendency of vegetal vitality and, on the other, sustain a fragile balance between the extremes of fetishistic obscurantism, denying the very possibility of meaning, and a scientific-phenomenological elucidation of that which is withdrawn. Abstract as

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2. Compare with Heidegger (1993). On Heidegger's reading of the Aristotelian equation of *phusis* with Being, see Heidegger (1998) as well as Baracchi (2006).



it might seem, the philosophical denegation of vegetative life, ignorant of its vivacity, has had real and palpable effects on the human approach to the natural environment, so that the woods are treated as nothing more than wood, a mass of lumber “produced” in the gigantic factory of planetary proportions. Indeed, the conflation of the woods and wood is not accidental; it presupposes the entire conceptual history of matter that became a rigorous term in Aristotle’s thought that took up the colloquial word for timber, *hulē*, into the nascent philosophical vocabulary. But, while, for Aristotle, *hulē* was still imbued with the dignity of the material cause, for the modern scientific consciousness, it designates nothing more than shapeless “stuff” awaiting an external imposition of form. In light of this conceptual prehistory, all that is required is to project the impoverished notion of matter onto its pre-philosophical source (*hulē* or timber) and to confirm, in a vicious circle, that the woods are only wood awaiting its “elevation,” as Hegel would put it, into the form of a house, a page in a book, or logs for the fireplace. In response to the identification of vegetative life with mute and inert matter, it is necessary to make the first, tentative steps toward acknowledging that this elusive life is the embodied limit of the metaphysical grasp and is, therefore, unapparent, hidden, encrypted, above all, *from the standpoint of metaphysics*. Needless to say, the practical outcomes of considering the plant as one of the signposts of philosophy’s finitude will include a radically different comportment toward the environment, which will no longer stand for a collection of natural resources and raw materials to be managed, more or less effectively, by human beings.

There is, however, an additional paradox in the assertion that the life of plants is “hidden.” For Aristotle, as for Hegel, plants are essentially superficial; unaware of the exchange of gases between plants and the atmosphere, the Greek philosopher considered their soul to be incapable of breathing (*pneuma*)—an ethereal process that was often taken to be synonymous with the soul and that bespoke a certain hiddenness of the organ of breathing, the lungs.<sup>3</sup> In the same spirit, the German thinker postulated an immediate identity between the inner life of the plant and its outer vitality. If plants have something like a soul, they wear it on their sleeves, so to speak, since “the plant’s vitality in general . . . does not exist as a state distinct from the plant’s inner life” (Hegel 2004, 304). Faced with these imputations of absolute superficiality to plants, how is it possible that something would be

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3. “The theory in the so-called poems of Orpheus presents the same difficulty; for this theory alleges that the soul, borne by the winds, enters into animals when they breathe. Now, this cannot happen to plants, nor to some animals, since they do not all breathe: a point which has escaped those who support this theory” (*De Anima* 410b, 28–411a, 3).

hidden where the dimension of depth is absent? A comparable puzzle lies at the core of Heidegger's ontological reading of phenomenology, with its encryption of Being not in the deepest reserves but right on the superficialities of the ontic. Rather than track down profound meaning, in the manner of an "archeology of knowledge," hermeneutics renders explicit what has been always already vaguely "pre-understood," what has been too close to us to be considered questionable. What is hidden and distant from us is the most obvious: that which is taken for granted and unnoticed because of its intimate familiarity. Instead of concealing a deeply buried secret, the encryption of vegetative life refers to its unquestioned obviousness, to that which survives in spite of the fact that it is not absorbed into and elucidated by metaphysical determinations.

Precisely with reference to the "breathing" of the plant and on the verge of making a dialectical transition to the philosophy of animality, Hegel intensifies the paradox and admits that this "process is obscure because of the sealed reticence of the plant [*verschlossenen Ansiehhaltens der Pflanze*]" (Hegel 2004, 338–339). A closed reserve, the plant, whose negativity is now intensified, holds back, keeps to itself, withholds its teaching—as Socrates notes in *Phaedrus*: "the country and the trees teach me nothing, whereas the men of the city do teach me" (230d)—and passively resists all efforts at comprehending it. Unlike an animal, the plant has no voice (this explains its reticence), and it is incapable of spontaneously determining its place by exercising the freedom of self-movement (which justifies its sealed character). Indifferent to the distinction between the inner and the outer, it is literally locked in itself, but such that it merges with the external environment to which it is completely beholden. In other words, it remains forever other to itself, creating an obstacle on the path of metaphysical thought that traffics solely in identities and self-identical units and that regards all else as obscure, sealed, and reticent. But, at the same time, it is this reticence of the plant that Spirit exploits in speaking *for* this sealed and obscure entity, in feigning to become its mouthpiece, and filling in the lacuna of non-identity, or, in the Plotinian vernacular, the "otherness" of vegetal desire, by subsuming the plant to the needs of animal consumption.<sup>4</sup> Metonymizing nature, which is only initially other to Spirit, the actuality of the plant is "spiritualized" and elevated in and through this productive destruction exemplary of *Aufhebung*. The unrecognized vegetative soul is supplanted by Spirit, which claims the absolute right of appropriation over the mute body of the plant, sublimated into divine body, the blood and flesh of Christ, as a consequence of its

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4. "While the body desires on its own account . . . the vegetative soul desires with a desire that stems from something else and through the agency of another" (*The Enneads* IV.4.20, 22–36).

concrete negation in the processes of fermentation: the transformation of grapes into wine and of wheat into bread.

Regardless of all the machinations of Spirit, the sealed reserve of the plant is not, thereby, broken. It would be plausible, in the Heideggerian vein, to attribute the reticence of vegetative life to its provenance, to the originary vivacity, ontologically understood as the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*) that withdraws and withholds itself from every human attempt to appropriate it. This conclusion would be in tandem with Aristotle's earlier insistence on the original status of plant-soul, "a kind of first principle in plants [*phutois psukhè arkhè*]" (411b, 28–29). The Aristotelian-Heideggerian hypothesis, nevertheless, loses sight of a certain inauthenticity implicit in this impure origin of life, the fragility or, as Hegel less charitably puts it, the "feebleness" of vegetal vitality (Hegel 2004, 346). Life's principle is still too weak in the plant, the soul of which is neither differentiated in its capacities, nor separated enough from the exteriority of its environment. But what is weakness for metaphysics marshals a strength of its own, both in the sense of a passive resistance it offers to the hegemonic thinking of identity and in the sense of its independence from the fiction of a unitary origin.<sup>5</sup> Among the ancients, Plotinus is the thinker most attuned to the originary "impurity" of plant-soul, which he variously describes as "a shadow of the soul," *skian psukhès*, (IV.4.18, 7) and as a "kind of echo of the soul" (IV.4.22, 2). The conventional meaning of the shadow and the echo as derivative from the original sights and sounds they replicate fits the Plotinian speculation that the living and ensouled earth itself is responsible for the germination of the seed hidden in it and that the earth, therefore, stands closer to the origin of life than the vegetation it nourishes and supports. At this point, on the quest for a purer origin, ancient animism finds itself in collusion with metaphysics. And yet, there is an alternative way to inherit the suggestive formulations of Plotinus, to read them against the grain by situating repetition and similitude—the shadow and the echo—at the source of life produced as a reproduction, the origin of which is deferred *ad infinitum*. The echo and the shadow of the soul are not its pale copies but the most faithful figurations of the living psyche in the incessant process of becoming.

To ensure that the trace of the plants' soul is not irretrievably lost in a massive objectification of vegetative life that is proceeding at an accelerated pace today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is imperative to transpose the categories Heidegger reserved for Dasein, or, simply, for human existence, back onto so-called "objective" nature. This transposition will not be tantamount to a direct translation, since

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5. I am using the concept of "weakness" in keeping with Gianni Vattimo's ideas of "weak thought" and "weakening of metaphysics"

it cannot ignore a qualitative difference between human and plant lives. Drawing, instead, on the notion of the trace, it will ask: What are the aspects of Heidegger's existential analytic that may survive their projection back onto vegetative life? How and in what shape are they going to persist? What is the sense of survival operative in this transposition? And what of the plant's soul lives on in us?

In deconstruction, the trace is a figure of weak presence, an imprint fatefully entwined with the absence of that which left it. But it is also a synonym for survival, the continuation of a life that has been shaken up by a rupture (trauma, for instance) portending death. The two-fold question apropos of the mutual survival of plant-soul in human beings and of the qualities of Dasein in the world of vegetation is a part of the economy of weak presence, locating traces of the plant in the human and traces of the human in the plant. We cannot help but feel a tinge of the uncanny in these questions demanding that we discern the constitutive vegetative otherness in ourselves and, simultaneously, relinquish the illusion that Dasein and the ontological comportment are exclusive to human beings while, all other manifestations of life are narrowly ontic. The other who (or that) bestows upon us our humanity need not be—in keeping with Aristotle's preferred points of comparison in *The Politics*—a god or a beast, the magnificently superhuman or the deplorably subhuman. It may well be the most mundane and unobtrusive instance of alterity, to which we do not dare to compare ourselves: the plant.

### **The Potentialities of Plants: Nourishment and Its Vicissitudes**

The starting point for our inquiry rotated around the basic signification of life as motion and the rather counter-intuitive attribution of this sense of living to plants. Aristotle further specifies the life of the soul in terms of a capacity (*dunamis*) for, at least, two types of movement—growth and decay (*De Anima* 412a, 14–15)—and for the absorption of nutrients. If life betokens “the movement implied in nutrition and decay or growth,” then “plants are considered to live, for they evidently have in themselves a capacity and first principle [*dunamin kai arkhèn*] by means of which they exhibit both growth and decay in opposite directions; for they do not grow up and not down, but equally in both direction, and in every direction” (413a, 26–30). We will do well to remember that the capacities are not superadded onto the Aristotelian soul, which is, actually, inseparable from them and that they denote active, dynamic tendencies, not passive features of the psyche. To be capable of something is to actively strive toward that of which one is capable, to be directed toward it, or, in Edmund Husserl's appropriation of Aristotle, to have intentionality—in this case, a non-conscious intentionality—which is a directedness-toward something, be it light, mineral nutrients, or something else. Regardless of its content, the formal assertion that

the plant is *capable of* something already imbues its existence with features that are not entirely passive.

The *dunamis* of vegetative soul, its capacity for growth but also for decay and the assimilation of nutrients, is enacted in a seemingly limitless extension in every conceivable direction, not just in a heliocentric tending toward the light. The plant's life is expressed in an incessant, wild proliferation, a becoming-spatial and a becoming-literal of intentionality. That this *non-conscious* intentionality of the plant edges closer to the *unconscious* is obvious both within the Aristotelian scheme, where there is no "difference between slumbering without being awakened from the first day till the last of a thousand or any number of years, and living a vegetable existence" (*Eudemian Ethics* I, 1216a, 1–10), and to the readers of Bergson, who, nevertheless, recommends that the definition of the vegetable "by consciousness asleep and by insensibility" be dynamic enough to accommodate those exceptional instances when "vegetable cells are not so sound asleep that they cannot rouse themselves when the circumstances permit or demand it" (Bergson 2005, 92). It is thus possible for the life of the plant to come, if only for a moment, out of its obscurity, countering the tendency whereby animal sensibility and conscious comportment falls back into the torpor and immobility of the vegetable. The replacement of rigid taxonomies with fluid becomings in Bergson's work synchronizes the tendencies of various kinds of life, whether animal or vegetal, with the dynamic capacities of the Aristotelian soul, inexhaustible in the terms of the static "ladder of Being," in which it was inscribed in medieval philosophy.

Vegetative life, with its seemingly infinite proliferation, displays the exuberance of growth and an equally spectacular decay that, in their excessiveness, put to work the capacities of plant-soul without ever fully actualizing or accomplishing them. Within the framework of actuality, this life is a failure, an unfinished project, but so, too, is human existence, provided that it is approached from the existential point of view. Although vegetative life lacks an objective finality, Aristotle, like many philosophers in his footsteps, chases after its elusive first principle, after a basic capacity of the soul from which all others may be deduced. According to *De Anima*, the generic *dunamis* of this life is the nutritive faculty, *to threptikon*, which is analogous to the fundamental haptic sense in animals (in a word, touch), subsequently differentiated into other specific senses (413b, 1–10). Tacitly alluding to Aristotle's text, Nietzsche mischievously carries the reduction of the classical capacities further, when, in a fragment dated 1886–87, he concludes, "'Nourishment'—is only derivative; the original phenomenon is: to desire to incorporate everything" (Nietzsche 1968, 247). With this, he weighs in on the now-forgotten ancient debate that involved a speculation whether

or not plants experienced desire. Whereas Plato and his followers were convinced that plants could be counted among desiring beings, Aristotle vehemently denied this conclusion. Plato's indications on the subject of vegetal desire are at their most revealing in *Timaeus*, where the soul of a rooted living being (that is, of the plant presented as an inferior kind of animal) is depicted as sharing "in sensations, pleasant and painful, together with desires [*epithumiōn*]," despite being incapable of self-movement (77b). The implicit part of the argument hinges on a supposition, articulated by pseudo-Aristotle, that what is capable of receiving nourishment is subject to the feelings of hunger, craving, and satisfaction depending on whether the nutrients are provided at any given moment. On this view, desire (first and foremost, vegetal desire, to which we are also privy whenever we are hungry or thirsty) is negative, predicated on a lack, and satisfied only temporarily for those brief moments when the organism is sated.<sup>6</sup> Against the backdrop of this deficient or defective desire, the exuberance of vegetative life is but a mask overlaying a profound absence of fulfillment, the default state of all living, hetero-affected beings reliant on something outside of themselves.

But should we accept it as an axiom that negativity is the cornerstone of desire, let alone of vegetal desire, if such a thing is conceivable? Nietzsche sides with Plato in the attribution of desire to the nourished living entities but, unlike the Platonists, he uncouples this faculty from the sensations of pleasure and pain, or, more broadly, from the connotations of absence and lack. The Nietzschean nutritive desire is an expression of the overflowing will to power, a pure positivity of growth and expansion where nothing is missing. Even if its object is a neutralized other incorporated into the same, the deepest source of desire proper to any living being (nourished by assimilating the other to itself, by destroying its otherness, and by drawing its energy in the process) is the positivity of self-affirmation or an increase in strength. Having stated the issue at the highest degree of abstraction, Nietzsche implies that this basic *modus operandi* of plant-soul is never truly superseded in the "higher" organisms and psychic processes. Instead, "[t]o this mode of nutrition, as a means of making it possible, belong all so-called feelings, ideas, thoughts" (1968, 341–42). In an ironic amplification of Aristotelianism and Hegelianism, the vegetative capacity for nourishment, or, more generally, for the assimilation

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6. "Similarly, Plato averred that plants must know desire, because of the extreme demands of their nutritive capacity. If this were established, it would be in accord with it that they should really know pleasure and pain, and that they should feel. And once this is established, it will be in accord with it that plants should know desire" (*De Plantis*, 815a, 22–26).

of alterity to the same, gets gradually sublimated into ideas and thoughts that perfect and spiritualize the strategies of incorporating the other. (Think back, on the one hand, to Hegel's *Geist* that idealizes the nutritive principle of assimilation and converts it into a method for building a totality and, on the other, to Aristotle's assertion that, without the nutritive faculty, the receptivity of sensation could not exist.) Philosophy itself becomes nothing but the most refined version of *threptikon*, where the act of thinking stands for a living legacy of the basic capacity proper to the plants' soul. Even in our highest endeavors, we remain sublimated plants.

It is unfortunate, then, that Nietzsche's brilliant intuition is marred by his metaphysically inflected view of the plant, demonstrating that, despite himself, he remains shackled to metaphysical ontology. In Heidegger's narrativization of the history of Western philosophy, Nietzsche has produced the last variation on Platonism by turning it upside down, by revaluing the highest Platonic values (for instance, the Ideas) as the lowest. The nineteenth-century thinker's name for Being is "will to power," the spring of the plant's capacity for nourishment and of the desire to assimilate the other that underpins this capacity. "Nourishment," Nietzsche writes, as though supplementing the already-cited passage, "[is] only a consequence of insatiable appropriation, of the will to power" (1968, 349). Underlying the exorbitant ontic growth and decay of vegetation, as well as the ontology of plant life as a process of incessant proliferation, is the insatiability of the desire to appropriate the other, to grow in force. It would seem that plants act on this desire on the most embodied level, by branching out in all directions: growing in height, spreading horizontally across vast expanses, burrowing their roots deep into the earth's crusts. The jungle, in particular, is Nietzsche's favorite example of the material workings of the unstoppable will to power in plants ("For what do the trees in a jungle fight each other? For 'happiness'?—*For power!*—" [1968, 375]). But his fatal error is that he includes vegetation under the headings of sameness and identity, even though plants lack a clearly demarcated space of psychic interiority and, as a consequence, are incapable of incorporating anything in their souls that merge with their bodies. The philosophical puzzle is that the insatiability of nutritive desire coincides, in the plant, with the nonexistence of an autonomous self to which the other would be appropriated. Surprisingly, Hegel deserves credit for being more sensitive to this issue than Nietzsche and for proposing that the plant's "assimilation to itself of the other . . . is also a going-forth-from itself" (2004, 304), an interiority immediately identical to the process of exteriorization. Still, for Hegel, the plant's inability to establish an identity with itself by means of the other is a vice, whereas for post-metaphysical plant-thinking it is a virtue, a *sine qua non* for the thought of

difference and non-identity that eschews the imperialistic appropriation of the other.

From nutrition, through assimilation and appropriation of the other to the same, to the will to power: the chain of reductions to the fundamental capacity of plant-soul winds on in an infinite regress to the evanescent first principle, rendering every new term more metaphysical than the preceding one. Nietzsche explains the latest and the most vital link in the conceptual chain—the will to power—as a desire for the accumulation of force, in the service of which the other has been put: “The will to accumulate force is special to the phenomena of life, to nourishment, procreation, inheritance—to society, state, custom, authority” (1968, 367). The exuberance of vegetative life, its proliferation is, thereby, metaphysically harnessed for a particular end, for the will to power, desiring the accumulation of more power (more life). Nietzsche does not entertain the hypothesis that the phenomena of life and, among these, the vitality of plants often preclude the hoarding of power because these living beings, like all the others, are the passages, outlets, or media for the other, and because, more precisely, they are but the intersections in the exchange of gases, or Fichtean “central points” in the process of chemical attraction and repulsion. For, what if plant-soul and plant-thinking let the other pass through them without detracting from its alterity? What if they grow so as to play this role more effectively, to welcome the other better? And what if all this is accomplished thanks to the essential incompleteness of linear growth that does not return to itself but is, from the very outset, other to itself? What if, finally, this inherent respect for alterity spelled out a key meaning of vegetative life?

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