

1. The Soul of the Plant or, The Meanings of Vegetal Life

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

—Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*

Psychologists no longer discussed vegetative activities.

—Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*

Modern readers are likely to greet positive references to “the soul of plants” with suspicion. This is not only because it seems absurd to locate the seat of the soul (and, *mutatis mutandis*, existential possibilities) in any being other than human, but also because we have grown deeply mistrustful of the heavy metaphysical and theological baggage weighing down this paleonym. Eighteenth-century French philosopher Julien La Mettrie, famous for the book *L’homme machine* (*Man a Machine*), has encapsulated his objections to his contemporaries’ revisiting of the outmoded theories of vegetal soul in a lesser-known treatise *L’homme plante* (*Man a Plant*), uncharitably describing these theories

as “imaginary chimeras.” “How foolish of modern thinkers to try to fill such souls again with subtle breath!” he quips. “Leave their names and their spirits in peace.”¹ As rigorous philosophers, we are expected to have heeded La Mettrie’s injunction and so purged our thinking of onto-theological nonsense, conjuring away the pernicious old names and spirits it had been accustomed to. Whenever possible, 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 Saint Augustine), “subjectivity,” or, again, “the psyche,” which, though it is the Greek word for the soul, gains in dignity by virtue of serving as the object of study in the field of psychology. Following the admonition of La Mettrie, in twenty-first-century philosophy, the “soul,” which at best finds refuge in a strictly theological discourse, is finally resting in the eternal peace afforded to it by the modern repression of the word and the thing it designated. No wonder that the ancient idea of a “vegetal soul,” too, is now more implausible, unfamiliar, and eccentric than ever!

But, already in its title, articulating one of the most metaphysically loaded concepts with the least metaphysical one, the present chapter evidences an attempt to conjure up these long-buried spirits and to disturb the peace of philosophical cemeteries. Indeed, it would appear that just as the invocations of “the soul” are superfluous, if not misleading, seeing that they are redolent of an outdated *Weltanschauung*, so the philosophical treatment of flora in the age of positivist science is unnecessary and is best left to the practitioners of the specialized (ontic) discipline of botany. Both verdicts have a common root in the reductively rationalized approach to reality, which has culminated in what Max Weber has called the “disenchantment of the world,” where the unquestioned priority of science goes hand in hand with a delegitimization of empirically unverifiable notions. What unites the soul and plants, the most ethereal and the most earthly, is their exclusion from the purview of respectable philosophical discourses in late modernity. It is their conjunction in this space of exclusion (or exception) that will furnish us with the point of entry into the *post-metaphysical ontology of vegetal life*, in a word, “plant-thinking.”

Contemporary philosophy disengages from these two entities and, in so doing, abandons them, sets them free. Left to their own devices, each transforms the other: the plant confirms the “truth” of the soul as something, in large part, non-ideal, embodied, mortal, and this-worldly, while the soul, shared with other living entities and construed as the very figure for sharing, corroborates the vivacity of the plant in excess of a reductively conceptual grasp. Within the confines of this commerce, the elusive life of the ensouled plant cannot become a scientific object without getting irretrievably lost, transformed into dead matter, dissipated in cellular activity and in the larger anatomical (or phytotomical) units, prepared in advance for vivisection.

What is in question then, in any retrieval 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 sources of food and fuel (at any rate, into something to be burned as calories or as combustibles) proceeds at an accelerated pace, it is urgent to resist the same process in thinking and to interpret the meanings of vegetal life—its precariousness, violability, and, at the same time, its astonishing tenacity, its capacity for survival—all the while steering clear of its objective and definitive determination. Only upon completing the proposed hermeneutical exercise will we be able to gauge the ethical and political implications of our treatment and mistreatment of plants, as much as the reverberations of vegetal life in beings called “human.”

THE OBSCURITY OF VEGETAL LIFE: ON BARELY PERCEPTIBLE MOTION

In various ways, ancient Greek thinkers associated life with motion. But aren't plants defined, exactly, by their incapacity to move, by their rootedness in the soil that renders them sedentary?

We find the initial intimation that the *tendency toward immobility*, as Henri Bergson expresses it, does not exhaust the mode of being

of plants in the etymology of “vegetation,” which points 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”), and the adjective *vegetus*, denoting the qualities of vigor and activity. The modern word “vegetable” thus 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 to the passivity or inactivity of animals or human beings who behave 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 brimming energy, the *ergon* of plant-soul. Vegetal activity encrypts itself in its modes of appearance by presenting itself in the guise of passivity, which is to say, by never presenting itself as such. The life of plants, therefore, poses a special challenge before hermeneutical phenomenology, incapable of elucidating that which does not appear in the open, that which emphatically does not give itself. It is an obscure non-object: obscure, because it ineluctably withdraws, flees from sight and from rigorous interpretation; non-object, because it works outside, before, and beyond all subjective considerations and representations.

What are some of the markers of this vegetal self-encryption? Despite its apparent immobility, the plant exhibits three out of four types of movement Aristotle enumerates in *De anima*, in that it can move by altering its state, by growing, and by decaying, though not by changing its position (406a14–17). Aristotle immediately adds that “if then the soul moves, it must have one, or more than one, of all of these kinds of movement,” thereby readying the theoretical space for a formal understanding of vegetal soul. It is astounding that plants are capable of motion if one identifies movement only with 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 living, is one and the same insight. Still alive in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who refers to the soul of plants as

“the first principle of movement in nature,” albeit a principle of movement that is entirely passive, driven from the outside,² this idea has become completely opaque to contemporary consciousness, out of touch with the ontology of vegetal existence. Such then is the first, though by far not the definitive, meaning of plant life: a certain pace and rhythm of movement, which we customarily disregard, since it is too subtle for our cognitive and perceptual apparatuses to register in an everyday setting, and with which the tempo of our own lives is usually out of sync.

Notwithstanding the violence Aristotle’s thought has unleashed against plants, his texts are fertile reserves for all those who wish to elucidate the non-metaphysical aspects of vegetal being. Among several definitions of the soul the Greek thinker provides in *De anima*, the most concise is that the soul is “the principle of animal life,” *arkhē ton zōon* (402a8). 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.³ 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 vegetal psyche is the blurring of the distinction between the categories of plants and animals, a subsumption of both under the heading of “animal life,” which is to say, a clandestine zoologization of the plant.

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, for instance, transgresses conceptual differentiations when he characterizes both plants and animals as “living things.” But where the qualitative distinction is absent, a quantitative one takes effect, so that plants are said to be deficient and to have a weaker purchase on life than animals. To conclude that plants are defective animals is still to grant to them the rudiments of the soul but also, at the same time, to subjugate these lesser ensouled beings to those in whom the principle of life expresses itself with clarity and strength. We will be justified in holding this most obvious solution to the philosophical-taxonomical problem

of the principle of vitality responsible for the devaluation of vegetal life and the transformation of the plants themselves into raw materials for animal and human consumption, a “standing reserve,” on which we unreflectively draw in order to satisfy our needs.

With the view to restoring the orderliness of metaphysical categories, the life of plants becomes a matter of degree: as living things, they presumably share more with inanimate materials 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 in space. “Plants seem to live,” writes Aristotle, “without sharing [*metekhonta*] in locomotion or in perception” (*De anima* 410b23–24). Their non-participation in the acts of locomotion and perception casts their life in the uncertain terms of a mere appearance, a matter of seeming: they only “seem to live.” But even this denigration contains an unexpected promise for the post-metaphysical ontology of plants. Denied the status of the first principle, vegetal life is not identical to the underived and hence fictitious pure origin of vitality but, on the contrary, signifies whatever remains after the subtraction of the potentialities unique to other genera of the soul. After we strip life of all its recognizable features, vegetal beings go on living; plant-soul is the remains of the psyche reduced to its non-human and non-animal modality. It is life in its an-archic 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. In a word, life as survival.

The privative description of the life of plants—which, due to their proximity to inanimate or inorganic things, are even poorer in the world (i.e., more purely passive) than Heidegger’s animals—is surely a reaction of metaphysical thought to the vegetal exuberance that escapes capture and taming by philosophical conceptuality. The excessive proliferation of plants (for instance, in the density of the jungle) surpasses the frames of philosophy incapable of encompassing this immoderate and immeasurable production and reproduction of life. Psychoanalytically speaking, the resourcelessness of a thought that confronts vegeta-

tion is here projected onto the very object that castrates metaphysics, spiriting the desired conceptual clarity away. Thus, in the discussion of “having” (*hexis*)—prospectively illuminating Heidegger’s “fundamental concepts of metaphysics”—Aristotle cites the plant, said to be “deprived” of eyes (*Metaphysics* 1022b24), as the paradigmatic example of lack and not-having. Is this deprivation an irreparable flaw or a sign of the plant’s quasi-divinity, given that in negative theology, too, we know God solely through a set of negative attributes as what He is not? And how is it to be reconciled with Theophrastus’s assertions with respect to the potency of vegetal life that “has the power of growth in all its parts, inasmuch as it has life in all its parts” (*Enquiry Into Plants* 1.1.3–4)? What if, like love for ancient Greeks, the complex and ambivalent image of the plant, as much as plant-thinking itself, were a child of plenitude and lack, at once of the greatest resourcefulness and the most drastic destitution of all?

With a few notable exceptions, the exuberance of vegetal life has gone largely unrecognized in Western philosophy. 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” (316a37–40). The author of *De plantis* has carried the reduction of life to its logical extreme, where shreds of the non-animal and inanimate soul persist in the plant. It is no longer a living thing but “an incomplete thing,” *ateles pragma* (316b6), something that is even less than a thing, something that 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 vegetal beings close to the bottom of the teleological ladder, but also because they do not fully fit the main metaphysical categories, in this case of the thing or the animal. Inanimate things are, on this view, still superior to plants because, unlike the latter, they fully correspond to their thingly essence. The fault of the plant, therefore, hinges on the fact that it is a thing that has overstepped the confines

of thinghood (but aren't all things, including the supposedly inanimate ones, uncontainable within the framework of their idealized identities?) without as yet rising to the next fully defined plane of metaphysics.⁴

What in the English translation of the text reads as the “incompletion” (*ateles*) of the plant is, likewise, its purposelessness, listlessness, lack of goal or *telos*, attributable to its non-correspondence to the relevant parts of the metaphysical paradigm. Those familiar with ancient Greek philosophy will find such designation puzzling, to say the least. Is the plant without *telos* excused from participating in the teleological scheme of metaphysical ontology? If so, is it expelled from the realm of Being? How can we reconcile such a blatant assertion of vegetal contingency with the orderly universe of the ancients? Be this as it may, it is worthwhile to examine both semantic inflections of incompleteness explaining the purported defectiveness of plants, especially since they stand at the epicenter of the systematic devaluation of vegetal life in Western thought.

If incompleteness means open-endedness, then vegetal growth fully satisfies this rendition of *ateles*, in that it knows neither an inherent end, nor a limit, nor a sense of measure and moderation; which is just another way of saying that it is monstrous and that equally monstrous and unbounded is the thought germinating in it. The life of a plant, metonymically associated with its growth (to say “violets grow in my garden” actually means “violets live in my garden”), is a pure proliferation bereft of a sense of closure.

We will have an occasion to revisit this construal of vegetal life as an increase of life when considering it through the double lens of Aristotle's “capacities” of the vegetal soul and Friedrich Nietzsche's will to power. For now, another permutation of limitless plant growth in nineteenth-century German philosophy is particularly relevant, namely G. W. F. 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*, where Hegel presents his dialectical philosophy of nature, is the conclusion that the linearity of vegetal 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.”⁵ The life of a plant is limited to its outward extension, itself unlimited by anything but the environmental conditions: the amount of sunlight, the moistness of the soil, and so forth. In dialectical geometry, the plant thus finds its schematic representation in the incompleteness of the line tending to (bad) infinity without closing unto itself in the circularity of a return; growth dooms the plant to strive toward exteriority without establishing any sort of inwardness, a quality Hegel associates with the soul. (We might say, somewhat ironically and with a nod of acknowledgment to Nietzsche’s theory of experience and memory as a kind of indigestion, that the notion of the soul as interiority is itself an offshoot of animal physiology. The processing of energy takes place within the entrails of the animal, the inverse of the “superficial” capture of sunlight by the foliage of plants. Psychic interiority is an idealized image of the digestive tract, and what it holds inside may not be too different from the contents of the latter.) The contrast between the ancient idea of *psukhē* as an active principle of life and the modern view that necessarily ascribes to it a free space of interiority, set apart from “inorganic nature,” could not be any starker. But despite this major difference, thinkers from Aristotle to Hegel have agreed upon the deficiency of linear growth, as compared to 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. Without a doubt, their consensus has had a negative impact on the value of vegetal life.

Plant growth is also seen as purposeless because the vegetal soul does not attain to any higher capacities other than those of endless nourishment and propagation. Having been exempted from the logic of means and ends, it may reach completion only from the external standpoint of those who will impose *their* ends onto these essentially goalless 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 vegetal 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. To him, the soul is the first principle *as well as* the final cause, which is to say that “in 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 [*psukhēs 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” (*De anima* 415b16–21). 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*) and that in which it accomplishes, with more or less excellence (*arētē*), the activities for which it is fit—here, the acts of generation, growth, and nutrition.

Were we 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 ladder, such an argument would still not justify the dialectical destruction, (or, literally, the consumption and the consummation) of the lower ends in the transition to the higher. This justification is possible only if we willfully forget, as Hegel does, about the existence of the vegetal soul, thereby reducing the plant to sheer materiality, to the case in point of spiritless and “self-less” nature. As a consequence of this forgetfulness or this repression, dialecticians will rationalize the enabling destruction of the plant’s body for the sake of Spirit, 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 its highest perfection; for in this it is the possibility of a higher existence and comes into contact with spiritual reality.”⁶

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 vegetal soul becomes dialectically plausible when 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 have become ennobled as

a result of this spiritual instrumentalization. Weeds, of course, must be devoid of Spirit, seeing that they stand in the way of cultivating activities that render “self-less Nature” useful. As for the so-called wilderness, it occupies an ambiguous position within Hegel’s system, in that it inspires human imagination and holds potentially consumable resources but does not as such attain “the highest perfection” of an apple orchard.

In a cultivated and consumable plant, Spirit will finally recognize itself as to some extent actual. But will nothing other than the plant’s productive destruction trigger this self-recognition of Spirit in the world of vegetation? Aristotle gives us the tools necessary to envision an alternative and nonviolent approach, though, admittedly, its effectiveness is rather limited. For the Greek thinker, no *teloi*, high or low, would have been accomplished had the vegetal 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, which in human beings have been superadded to the vegetal soul, are anything but an outgrowth, an excrescence, or a variation of the latter. The sensitivity of the roots seeking moisture in the dark of the soil, the antennae of a snail probing the way ahead, and human ideas or representations we project, casting them in front of ourselves, are not as dissimilar from one another as we tend to think. Assuming then 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, do human beings derive their identity from their inconspicuous vegetal other? In one shape or another, these will be the focal questions of *Plant-Thinking*.

We began by formulating vegetal vitality as a riddle buried in the folds of Western metaphysics. The crude solution to the problem of plant 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 vegetation. From the vantage point of Aristotelianism, the occult nature of plant life is the result of its relatively imperceptible types of movement: change of state, growth, and decay. Saint Thomas Aquinas has Aristotle’s typology in mind when he writes in *Summa Theologica* that “life 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” (q. 69, art. 2). Those features that vegetation shares with inanimate things, namely the lack of sense and locomotion, obfuscate its life processes, camouflaging vitality behind a façade of death and throwing into disarray habitual differentiations between the animate and the inanimate. Soulless 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 “either/or.”

Prior to Saint Thomas, the author of *De plantis* similarly oscillated between a denial that plants were living beings and an affirmation of the 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*). Vegetal life, conversely, is inaccessible, encrypted (*kekrummene*), and unapparent (*emphanes*) (815a10–13). 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. It follows that to raise the question of vegetal life phenomenologically, by chasing it out of its concealment and by shedding light onto it, is already to violate this life, to overlook its non-phenomenality. And conversely, 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, responsible for the unapparent character of vegetal life, replicates the activity of *phusis* itself, which, according to the famous Heraclitean fragment 123, “loves to hide,” *kryptesthai philei*. The cryptic life of plants stands for the synecdoche of self-veiling nature—for *phusis*, which, in its Greek derivation from the root *phuo-* and the verb *phuein* (“to generate,” “to grow out,” or “to bring forth”), alludes to the world of vegetation and the plant (*phutō*).⁷

The parallel between nature as a whole and the plant is a promising beginning for the philosophy of vegetal 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.⁸ *Phusis*, with its pendular movement of dis-closure, revela-

tion and concealment, is yet another—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, similarly, first emerge in the plant only to retreat from it following its merciless reification, the inflation of its thingly dimension, and the forgetting of its ontological makeup. But while Heidegger attributes a positive function to the negative moment of being's withdrawal, casting it in terms of the indispensable underside of truth as un-concealment (*a-letheia*), the ancient insights on the encryption of life in the plant give rise to its mystifying fetishization.

Fetishism, *nota bene*, is a dangerous but not unavoidable supplement to the ontological approach to vegetal life. For the fetishist and animist mentalities, although plants bear resemblance to mere things, they engender a mysterious excess over other inanimate entities, the excess that, inexplicable and miraculous within a reified order, is treated as worthy of veneration. The early religious fertility cults are of course the most unsublimated version of venerating something non-thingly within the thing, something 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, vegetal life turns all the more numinous and obscure, so that its meanings are completely withdrawn, made unapparent and indiscernible, paving the way for the projection of human purposes and goals onto it. Whereas the complete phenomenization of life leaves nothing to interpretation, because everything has been placed in the open, the plants' becoming-noumenal likewise forecloses hermeneutical ventures, insofar as it reduces the meaning of vegetal life to pure meaninglessness. As plants testify in their own manner, life, onto-phenomenologically conceived, is the process of coming to light that is not entirely victorious over obscurity. Symbolically then vegetal existence could be seen as a metaphor for vivacity itself: the germination of a plant striving toward the light of the sun happens simultaneously with its roots burrowing ever deeper into the darkness of the earth: "While the 'plant' sprouts, emerges, and extends itself into the open, it simultaneously goes back into its roots in that it fixes them in the closed and takes its stand. The self-unfolding is inherently a

going-back-into-itself.”⁹ The plant’s (and thought’s) deracination and total exposure to light make it perish, as does its isolation from the sun’s luminous warmth.

The fragile balance of light and darkness, of the open and the closed, required for the plant’s biological life is equally applicable to its persistence as a living figuration of thought; if we are to “think the plants,” we must not shy away from darkness and obscurity, even as we let them appear in their own light, the one emanating from their own kind of being. In remarking that “to establish [the plant life’s] existence requires considerable research” (815a13–14), pseudo-Aristotle appeals to what we may call a “hermeneutics of vegetal life” as a way of tearing it out of concealment without determining its meaning once and for all. If it is to be effective, such hermeneutics must on the one hand precipitate a critique of philosophy that has thus far forced the life of plants into retreat, exacerbating the ownmost tendency of vegetal vitality, and on the other sustain a delicate equilibrium between the extremes of fetishistic obscurantism, which denies the very possibility of meaning, and a scientific-phenomenological elucidation of that which is withdrawn. A critique of philosophy—or more precisely, deconstruction of the metaphysical representations of plants—is the preparatory work needed for the hermeneutics of vegetal life to flourish in the conceptual space of semi-obscurity conducive to this life.

Abstract as it might seem, the philosophical denegation of vegetal existence has had palpable effects on the human approach to natural environment, so that, for example, the woods are treated as nothing more than wood, a mass of lumber “produced” in a gigantic and infinitely stocked factory of planetary proportions. This example is not accidental, given that the concept of *matter* arose in Aristotle’s thought by way of adopting the everyday word for timber, *hulē*, for rigorously philosophical purposes. But while Aristotle still imbued *hulē* with the dignity of the material cause, for the modern scientific consciousness it designates nothing more than the 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 back onto its pre-philosophical source (*hulē* or timber) and so to confirm, in a vicious

circle, that the woods are wood awaiting its elevation—as Hegel would have it—or the sublation of its immediate existence into the form of a house, a page in a book, or logs in the fireplace. For, and one should keep this in mind, essentially “incomplete” things become what they are only when they are on the verge of no longer being.

In response to the regrettable identification of vegetal life with mute and inert matter, it is imperative to make the first, tentative steps toward acknowledging that this elusive vitality is the embodied limit of the metaphysical grasp and is therefore unapparent, hidden, and above all encrypted, *from the standpoint of metaphysics* that unwittingly sides with ancient animism. Needless to say, the practical outcomes of considering the plant as one of the signposts of philosophy’s finitude, situated both below the threshold of metaphysical understanding and at the much more positive limits of vegetal hermeneutics, will include a drastically different comportment toward the environment, which will no longer be perceived as a collection of natural resources and raw materials managed, more or less effectively, by human beings. And since plants are the synecdoches of nature as a whole, their philosophical defense bears upon all of *phusis*, without running the risk of replicating the abstract, general, and indifferent metaphysical thinking enamored with totalities, such as nature or indeed the environment.

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, and this makes certain botanical sense, given that they strive to a maximization of their surfaces in order to capture as much solar energy as possible. At the same time, 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 synonymous with the soul and one that bespoke a certain hiddenness of the organ of respiration, the lungs.¹⁰ In the same spirit, the German thinker posulated 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.”¹¹ In the face of these imputations of absolute superficiality to plants, how is it possible

that something would be hidden there where the dimension of depth is absent? And what is the relation between this sort of hiddenness—call it “superficial hiddenness”—and the withdrawal of the human soul to subjective interiority—call it “profound hiddenness”?

A comparable puzzle lies at the core of Heidegger’s ontological reading of phenomenology, where being is encrypted not in the deepest recesses of an entity (as it is in Hegel’s philosophy, before the dialectical mediation of being’s essence with its outward appearances) but right on the superficialities of the ontic. Ontico-ontological difference is in this sense superficial. Hermeneutics realizes the value of such superficiality: rather than track down profound meaning, in the manner of an archeology of knowledge, it renders explicit what has been always already vaguely “pre-understood,” what has been right on the surface of things, 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; it is being itself. Instead of concealing a deeply buried secret, the encryption of vegetal life refers to this life’s unquestioned obviousness, to the soul of plants that is so close to us that it to a large extent and unbeknownst to us constitutes human beings.

Precisely with reference to the “breathing” of the plant and on the brink of making a 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 Ansichhaltens der Pflanze*].”¹² 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 choosing 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 in such a way that it merges with the external environment, to which it is completely beholden. In other words, it is absolutely other to itself and, as such, transcends the relative and reciprocal distinction between sameness and otherness. It poses 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* the 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.¹³

Like nature, with which it stands in a synecdochic relation and which is only initially other to Spirit, the plant undergoes spiritualization and elevation at the price of its productive destruction wrought by *Aufhebung*, the dialectical sublation.¹⁴ Spirit interposes itself into the place of the vegetal soul it has refused to recognize. In so doing, it claims the absolute right of appropriation over the mute body of the plant, sublimated, for example, into the divine body, the Eucharistic blood and flesh of Christ, as a consequence of its concrete negation in the humanly (spiritually) controlled processes of fermentation: the transformation of grapes into wine or “spirits” and of wheat into bread. Through the sanctified human activities of cultivating certain kinds of plants and transforming them into edible or drinkable substances (here, I repeat, we are dealing with a very telling example), the subaltern plant, itself incapable of speech, is represented by and commences to speak with more than one voice and in more than one tongue: it comes to ventriloquize at once the voice of Reason and that of Revelation . . . and so ceases to be a plant.

When Spirit speaks for and misrepresents the plant, it does not thereby break the sealed reserve of vegetal life. It would be plausible, in the Heideggerian vein, to attribute the reticence of this life to its provenance, to the originary vivacity, ontologically understood as the event of appropriation (*Ereignis*), the very self-giving of being, that withdraws and withholds itself from every human attempt to appropriate it. This conclusion would be in line with Aristotle’s earlier insistence on the original status of plant-soul, “a kind of first principle in plants [*phutois psukhē arkhē*]” (*De anima* 411b28–29). We might notice, nevertheless, that the Aristotelian-Heideggerian hypothesis loses sight of a great deal of inauthenticity implicit in this impure origin of life—the fragility or, as Hegel puts it less kindly, the “feebleness” of vegetal vitality.¹⁵ Life’s principle is still too weak in the plant, the soul of which

is neither differentiated in its capacities nor separate enough from the exteriority of its environment. But what is weakness for metaphysics marshals a strength of its own,¹⁶ both in the sense of passive resistance it offers to the hegemonic thinking of identity and in the sense of its independence from the fiction of a strong unitary origin. The botanical event of appropriation is necessarily that of primal ex-appropriation, either of the plant by itself, i.e., by the absence of its self-identity, or by animal or human beings.

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 psukhēs*]” (4.4.18.7), and as a “kind of echo of the soul” (4.4.22.2). The conventional interpretation of the shadow and the echo as derivative from original sights and sounds buttresses 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 does the vegetation it nourishes and supports: the vitality of plants echoes the more intense life of the earth. At this point on the quest for a purer origin, ancient animism is 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 locating the more or less obscure 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*. Life is an echo of itself, resonating with equal non-originaryity in all living beings, incapable of ever appropriating it. The echo and the shadow of the soul are not its pale copies but the most faithful figurations of the psyche in the incessant process of becoming. They are especially pertinent to plant-soul, since they help maintain the precarious balance between obscurity and luminosity both in the existence of and in the theoretical elaborations on vegetal beings.

In the terms of contemporary philosophy, the echo and the shadow are traces, presences that are from the outset “impure,” contaminated by absence. Somewhat closer to us, F. W. J. Schelling reiterates the Plotinian insight when he writes that “in every organization there is something *symbolic*, and every plant is, so to speak, the intertwined trace of

the soul.”¹⁷ The symbolic constitution of everything, including nature, implies that the entire universe is at least potentially meaningful and that meaning is not at all separate from the life of every organization and of every organism but is coextensive with their ontological dimensions. These structures of meaning are not objectively metaphysical, immutable and pre-given, like the Book of Nature or the DNA code, awaiting their decipherment; rather, “the trace of the soul” determines symbolic constitution from the standpoint of what is so constituted, in and through the act of living itself. Phenomenologically speaking, the world becomes meaningful (or selectively illuminated) *for someone*, for a consciousness that has experiences by virtue of sense-bestowal (*Sinngebung*) positing the being of its object, or for a life lived outside the purview of consciousness. As a consequence of Schelling’s intriguing idea, within the broad epigenetic conception of nature as suffused with subjectivity, plants, carrying traces of the soul, are not mere objects to be studied and classified; they are also agents in the production of meaning (a vegetal “autoproduction” of meaning without the interference of thought, in a succinct formulation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty),¹⁸ even if this meaning is pertinent to their generative and nutritive capacities and activities alone. What appears to be meaningless and obscure *to us* becomes meaningful as soon as we try to imagine, at the edge of our imaginative capacity, the perspectives of those beings that live unconcerned with symbolic meanings. The old question about the “meaning of life” should as a result give way to questions about the meanings of *lives* (both human and non-human) that arise, practically and concretely, from the heterogeneous vivacious activities of every single creature, including a plant.

To ensure that the trace of the plant’s soul is not irretrievably lost in the massive objectification of vegetal life proceeding at an accelerated pace today, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to transpose the categories Heidegger reserved for *Dasein*, or, simply, for human existence, back onto “objective” nature. Admittedly, this transposition will not be tantamount to a direct translation, since it cannot ignore the qualitative differences between human and plant lives. Provided that the notion of the trace is taken seriously, the following questions will

immediately confront us: What are the aspects of Heidegger's existential analytic that may survive their projection back onto vegetal 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? I will take up these and related questions in my subsequent theorization of "vegetal existentiality" in part II of this study.

In deconstruction too the trace is a 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 shaken up by a rupture (trauma, for instance) portending death. The twofold 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 that locates 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 the demand that we discern the constitutive vegetal otherness in ourselves and simultaneously relinquish the illusion that *Dasein* with its ontological comportment is 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 (already or yet) dare to compare ourselves: the plant.

THE POTENTIALITIES OF PLANTS; OR, THE VICISSITUDES OF NOURISHMENT

The starting point for our inquiry had to do with the basic signification of life as motion and the rather counterintuitive 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* 412a14–15)—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 arkhēn*] 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 directions, and in every direction” (413a26–30). It will be recalled that the capacities are not superimposed upon the Aristotelian soul, which is actually inseparable from them, but that instead 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 with one’s whole being, to find one’s very being in this striving. In Edmund Husserl’s appropriation of Aristotle, to be capable of . . . is to have intentionality, which is a directedness-toward something, be it the perceived, the desired, the willed, or—we might add—for a plant, light, moisture, mineral nutrients. Regardless of its content, the formal assertion that the plant is *capable of* something already endows its existence with qualities that are not entirely passive.

The *dunamis* of the vegetal soul, its capacity for growth but also for decay and the assimilation of nutrients, sets itself to work in a seemingly limitless extension in every conceivable direction, not just in a heliocentric tending toward the light. Plant life expresses itself both by means of biochemical signaling and in an incessant, wild proliferation, a becoming-spatial and a becoming-literal of intentionality. Multidirectional growth is already in and of itself the budding of dense meaning and sense—*sens* and *sentido*, meaning in French and Portuguese both “meaning” and “direction.” 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, 1216a1–10), 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 rare instances when “vegetable cells are not so sound asleep that they cannot rouse themselves when circumstances permit or demand it.”¹⁹ It is thus possible for the life of the plant to awaken, if only for a brief moment, to come out of its obscurity, countering the tendency of animal

sensibility to fall 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 distinct 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," wherein the notion of the soul was imprisoned in medieval philosophy. Meaning in its spatial becoming is what plants enact by exercising the capacities of their soul.

Vegetal life, with its seemingly infinite proliferation, displays an 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, unless its incompleteness is positively understood from the existential point of view. To be sure, a productivist teleology may impute finality to the plant's coming to fruition, but this imputation would be alien to the living of life inexhaustible in any of its tangible "outcomes."

Although vegetal life lacks an objective end, Aristotle, like many philosophers in his footsteps, chases after its elusive first principle, the basic capacity and the unitary origin of the soul from which he would deduce all the others. According to *De anima*, the generic *dunamis* of this life is the nutritive faculty, *to threptikon*, homologous to the fundamental haptic sense in animals (in a word, touch), which is subsequently differentiated into other specific senses (413b1–10). *To threptikon*, Aristotle contends, is the precise place where the soul begins in a simple unity that will grant life to plants and to all living beings without exception. It is the minimal level of vitality that distinguishes living entities from mere things, and the plant stands right at the threshold of this distinction, given that no other capacities supplement *to threptikon* in its sphere of existence.

In a tacit allusion to Aristotle's text, Nietzsche mischievously carries the reduction of the classical capacities further, when in a fragment dated 1886–1887 he concludes, "Nourishment'—is only derivative; the original phenomenon is: to desire to incorporate everything."²⁰ With this, he weighs in on the now-forgotten ancient debate that un-

folded around the speculation as to whether 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 *qua* an inferior animal) is thought to share "in sensations, pleasant and painful, together with desires [*epithumiōn*]," despite being incapable of self-movement (77b). The sensate, desiring vegetal soul thus already includes elements of *to phronimon*, intelligence as discernment.²¹

The unstated premise of the argument for the plausibility of vegetal desire is a supposition, which pseudo-Aristotle subsequently articulated,²² that what is capable of receiving nourishment is subject to the feelings of hunger, craving, and satisfaction depending on whether nutrients are available at any given moment. On this view, desire (first and foremost, plant desire, to which we are also privy whenever we are hungry or thirsty) is negative, predicated on lack, and satisfiable exclusively in those brief intervals when the organism is sated. Against the background of this deficient or defective desire, the exuberance of vegetal life is but a veneer overlaying a profound absence of fulfillment, the default state of all living, hetero-affected beings reliant on something outside of themselves. But if this is so, then the plant is the most desiring being of all, precisely because it is the one most dependent on exteriority.

Should we accept it as an axiom that negativity is the essence 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 it 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, the pure positivity of growth and expansion where nothing is missing. Even if its object is a neutralized other incorporated into the same, its most profound source—proper to any living being nourished by assimilating the other to itself, by destroying this otherness, and by drawing its energy in the process—is the positivity of

self-affirmation, an increase in strength. Having stated the issue at the highest degree of abstraction, Nietzsche implies that “higher” organisms and psychic processes have never really superseded this basic *modus operandi* of plant-soul. Instead, “to this mode of nutrition, as a means of making it possible, belong all so-called feelings, ideas, thoughts.”²³ In an ironic amplification of Aristotelianism and Hegelianism, the vegetal capacity for nourishment, or more generally for the assimilation of alterity to the same, is gradually sublimated into ideas and thoughts that finesse and spiritualize the strategies of incorporating the other, of feeding themselves on difference, and of harnessing desire for dematerialized ends. (Think back, on the one hand, to Hegel’s *Geist* and how it idealizes the nutritive principle of assimilation converted into a method for building a totality, and on the other, to Aristotle’s assertion that without the nutritive faculty, the receptivity of sensation would not have been possible.) Philosophy itself becomes but the most refined and sublimated version of *to threptikon*, where the act of thinking embodies the living legacy of vegetal soul’s signature capacity. Even in our highest endeavors, we remain sublimated plants.

It is thus particularly unfortunate that Nietzsche’s brilliant intuition is marred by his reductive view of the plant as a vegetal manifestation of the will to power. 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 reinforcing the already-cited passage, “[is] only a consequence of insatiable appropriation, of the will to power.”²⁴ 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 insatiable desire to appropriate the other, to grow in force. It would seem that plants act on this desire in the most literal sense, by branching out in all directions: growing in height, spreading horizontally across vast expanses, burrowing their roots deep into the Earth’s crusts, and by imbibing everything from the

water, the air, and the soil that surrounds them. Their “other” is the entire inorganic mineral world, the world they conquer both by spatially spreading themselves on the surface of the planet and by “digesting” mineral nutrients. This is why the jungle is Nietzsche’s favorite example for 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!*—”) fighting for their place under the sun and trampling other vegetal beings in the process.²⁵ At the hands of Nietzsche, then, vegetal life loses its multiple semantic layers, gets torn out of its obscurity, and is reduced to little more than the conquest of inorganic elements accompanied by a struggle of plants against one another.

But this is precisely Nietzsche’s error: besides projecting anthropomorphic feelings and behaviors onto plants, he includes them under the concepts of sameness and identity. He ignores the fact that in the absence of a clearly demarcated space of psychic interiority, they are incapable of incorporating anything in their souls which merge with the materiality of their bodies. The paradox 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. In the absence of identity, the increase of power for the plant “itself” implies the augmentation of power for its “other,” be it another plant or inorganic nature as a whole. 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,”²⁶ 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 prerequisite for the thought of difference and non-identity incompatible with the imperialistic appropriation of the other.

From nutrition through the 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 and abstract than the preceding one. Nietzsche explains the latest and the most vital link in the conceptual chain as a desire for

the accumulation of force: “The will to accumulate force is special to the phenomena of life, to nourishment, procreation, inheritance—to society, state, custom, authority.”²⁷ The philosopher harnesses the exuberance of vegetal life, its untamable proliferation, for a definite end, that is, the will to power that desires in the last instance 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. Their unique ensouled existence enjoins plants to be the passages, the outlets, or the media for the other. What if, consistent with this conclusion, the advantage of plant-soul and plant-thinking is that they let the other pass through them without detracting from the other’s alterity? What if they grow so as to play this role more effectively, to welcome the other better? 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? And what if, finally, this inherent respect for alterity spelled out the multiple meanings of vegetal life?

ON “THE COMMON”: MODES OF LIVING AND THE SHARED SOUL

The breaking point in Nietzsche’s meditations on the plant is his analysis of its synthetic unity into a multiplicity of growths resisting the drive toward accumulation and totalization. Inquiring into something we may recognize as the non-conscious intentionality of vegetal life, its directedness-toward . . . —“What does a plant strive for?”—Nietzsche responds: “—but here we have already invented a false unity which does not exist; the fact of a millionfold growth with individual and semi-individual initiatives is concealed and denied if we begin by positing a crude unity ‘plant.’”²⁸ The striving of vegetal beings is not a simple unidirectional effort; the non-conscious intentionality of plants and plant parts (which, like the florets within the sunflower, are not at all distinguishable from the vegetal “whole”) is hopelessly dispersed and

disseminated. In these lines, then, Nietzsche de-idealizes the plant and thereby liberates the difference imprisoned in this conceptual unit, just as roughly a century after him Jacques Derrida would release packs of heterogeneous animals from the constraints of “the animal”²⁹ and multiple things from the identitarian stricture of “the thing itself.”³⁰ Plant-thinking is the thought of intentionality’s un-synthesizable dispersion: whereas Hegel’s “plant-life . . . begins where the vital principle gathers itself into a point,”³¹ Nietzsche’s vegetal vitality commences with the atomic fission of the unitary principle into an infinite number of points. Plant-thinking starts with the explosion of identity.

How does the material analysis of crude vegetal unities into subconceptual multiplicities bear upon plant-soul? From Aristotle to Nietzsche, philosophers have depicted the vegetal psyche as a loosely organized conglomeration of souls, a synthetic assemblage where the unity of the whole is only provisional. Life itself is lived primarily in and as dispersion—Aristotle was already acutely aware of this insight, against which he struggled in his thought, dedicating all his energy to finding a formula that would permit life to return to itself, to be gathered in itself. Despite furnishing the indelible image of *theoreia* in response to the demand to concentrate the life of the mind in a coherent totality, the Greek philosopher grants that biological life is necessarily dispersed, for instance when he takes the empirical observation that once a twig is separated from the mother plant, it will become a new plant, to mean, on a metaphysical plane that parallels certain strands in Jain philosophy, that each vegetal being potentially has more than one soul: “For just as in the case of plants some parts clearly live when divided and separated from each other, so that the soul in them appears to be one in actuality in each whole plant, but potentially more than one [*dunamai de pleionon*]” (*De anima* 413b15–20). The analogy crops up in the course of discussing the faculties of the soul (the nutritive, the sensitive, and the cogitative) and tackling the challenge of comprehending parts of the soul based on divisions in space. Aristotle deems the problem to be easily resolvable when it comes to plants and certain animals, like worms, that continue to live even after being cut in half. In these cases,

the unity of plant-soul is in actuality a mere appearance concealing the potential proliferation of souls, manifold and divisible. Plant-soul is in and of itself a conglomerate of plant-souls: both one and many.

The infinite divisibility of the nutritive soul, as well as of certain sensory animal souls, makes it approximate the body, defined through this feature of extension as much in the writings of Aristotle as in Descartes. So intimately is the extended vegetal psyche bound to the body it animates that its nature is barely distinguishable from that of corporeal entities. The plant's life is indissociable from the finitude and materiality of its soul, and this is why Aristotle concludes that this soul is perishable, subject to degeneration and decay, in contrast to the "soul of another genus," *psukhēs genos heteron*, the mind and the immortal faculty of thinking (413b25–27). The division in the soul between the divisible and the indivisible complicates a straightforward opposition between the simple psychic unity and the composite character of the body: the synthetic—and, therefore, prone to being analyzed or broken down—structure of the soul belongs to plants as much as to animals, as Fichte later explained in his theory of the animal psyche comprised of "a system of plant-souls."³² Freudian psychoanalysis crosses the next frontier when it postulates the *a priori* divisibility of the psyche into the conscious and the unconscious, itself differentiated into a network of traces. The object of *psycho-analysis*, wherein we might detect a vegetal approach to the psyche, is no longer "a soul of another genus" but an extended psychic thing entwined with the body itself—a somatic, and thus divisible, soul akin to that of a plant.³³ Post-metaphysical thought, such as that of psychoanalysis, no longer believes in the fiction of the indivisible and immortal soul "of another genus." Psychic divisibility becomes the destiny of humanity that, perhaps without knowing it, sets for itself an infinite task: that of recovering its vegetal heritage.

Whether it puts itself to work in plants or in human beings, the divisible vegetal psyche does not prevent the formation of fleeting collectivities, or loose assemblages, that, at the extreme, give off the appearance of independent organisms and monolithic social or political entities. Nietzsche's reduction of the unity "plant" to proliferating multiplicities

reaches out, by the same stroke, to the Hegelian determination of the plant in terms of a “difference in itself” or an inner “dispersion into a multiplicity of . . . forms”³⁴ and, still further back, to the Aristotelian plant-soul, where the dynamic unity of what has been dispersed defines this soul’s nutritive capacity. In an effort to envision this unity in flux, from the perspective of becoming rather than being, Nietzsche resorts to a peculiar elucidation of “life.” “A multiplicity of forces,” he writes, “connected by a common mode of nutrition, we call ‘life.’”³⁵

There is then a way to bring back together multiple “individual and semi-individual initiatives” of growth that had been indiscriminately absorbed into the concept of the plant without homogenizing them, without losing their singularity. Life in Nietzsche’s rendition is a trajectory, temporarily gathering the diverse; as he specifies later on: “‘Life’ would be defined as an enduring form of processes of the establishment of force, in which the *different contenders grow unequally*.”³⁶ But what is it that allows this new term to succeed, almost magically or alchemically, there where other unitary notions have failed? Why does difference (here, the dispersion of vegetal growths) escape unscathed its incorporation into “life”? And does the act of living *necessarily* trigger various inequalities among “different contenders”?

The common thread tying together the multiple quanta of force in the first definition of life is the nutritive capacity, the mainstay of the vegetal soul. What is significant, I believe, is that in accounting for this red thread, Nietzsche privileges not so much nutrition itself as its function as a common mode combining a multiplicity of forces. What is the sense of this commonality? It can imply three things: (1) that when it comes to a single living entity (a tulip, for example) the unity of its roots, stem, leaves, and flower is due to the fact that these moments of growth are traversed by a unitary network of vessels delivering nutrients to each part; (2) that different modes of nutrition mark different forms of life: plants are distinct from animals because the former draw nutrients from the soil through their roots (hence their immobility), whereas the latter devour plants and other animals (hence their mobility); or (3) that all living beings are alive, participate in the act of living, to the extent that they are able to be nourished, or share nutrition as a com-

mon mode of being. Nutritional commonality will therefore apply to parts of the same being, a group of similar beings, or all living creatures, depending on the extent of the network wherein multiple, previously disparate quantities of force temporarily come together.

The third sense of being in common Nietzsche's fragment suggests—that all living beings are basically alive thanks to being able to be nourished—is entirely consistent with Aristotle's claim in *De anima* that “the nutritive soul [*threptikē psukhē*] belongs to all other living creatures besides man, and is the first and most widely shared [*kai prōte kai koinotate*] faculty of the soul, in virtue of which they all have life” (415a23–26). That which is most common is the most widely shared and the first, the origin always already divided, falling apart, and as a consequence supplanted or usurped by another origin (the principle of animality). Plant-soul is a concrete expression of such division of and at the origin—the kind of primordial generosity that gives itself to all other creatures, animates them with this gift (“in virtue of which they all have life”), parts against itself, and in this parting and falling apart invites the participation of beings in the acts of living. The gift of plant-soul does not eliminate infinite differences among its recipients but allows them to surge into being, to be what they are. Because the generosity of vegetal soul is inexhaustible, at least whilst *there are* living beings at all, it is a precious non-resource, shared infinitely without being depleted, a reserve without bottom but also without depth (recall that the plant represents essential superficiality). Practices of deforestation are the ontic mistranslations of the ontological principle of infinite vegetal giving, in that such practices conflate the trees themselves, living beings that are *not* stockpiled in the planetary “factory,” with infinitely renewable resources. That which is the most widely shared becomes the most deeply violated and subject to a desire for unlimited appropriation.

In spite of this, plant-soul is inappropriable, both in us and outside of us, just as the life it bestows upon “all living creatures” cannot belong to any one of them once and for all. The gift of vegetal life overwhelms the limits of our receptivity, and it is this incapacity to accept the given as a whole that instigates the (ineluctably, albeit positively, incomplete) life

itself. In making this observation, we have already switched around the traditional perspective, for as we know, within the purview of metaphysics defectiveness lies on the side of the plant. According to the divisions of the human soul in *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance, the vegetal (*phutikō*) and the most common (*koinō*) soul is depicted, in an extraordinarily privative modality, as being “without reason,” *alogon* (1.13.9–10). But this depiction anticipates in advance the inversion and indeed the subversion of the power of reason: when *logos* comes across the *alogical* faculty of the soul, it finds itself faced with an absolute limit it cannot surpass, a life it cannot make its own in exercising its power of persuasion, which will potentially be effective when it appeals to the irrational (or *illogical*) part of the psyche, capable of registering the injunctions that emanate from reason. Distinct from this latter part, the vegetal, most widely shared, soul, which “does not share in the rational principle at all” (1.13.18), is absolved of all responsibility and turns into a trope of innocence,³⁷ unable to act otherwise than it does in growing and nourishing itself. Its acts are not immoral, but amoral; not irrational, but non-rational; motivated, in Nietzsche’s words, by “the *will* to ignorance,” without which “life itself would be impossible.”³⁸ The vegetal ethics of relentless giving (of itself) passes at best for a beautiful amorality.

The consensual outcome of reasoning activity is restricted in scope when compared to the commonality (which it desperately desires to recreate) that brings living beings together in an entirely non-rational way, without a genus, by means of a “vital faculty” that “exists in all things that assimilate nourishment” (3.13.11). What is most common in all that lives establishes commonality thanks to the assimilation of nourishment, that is to say, thanks to an appropriation of the other to the same who (or that) devours it. Even so, the nutritive-physiological process does not simply map the methods of creating common grounds on the terrain of vegetal psyche. In order to avoid potential confusion, I wish to single out three versions of commonality attributed, in the history of Western philosophy, to plant-soul. With respect to each version we will assess “the common” in terms of how amenable it is to

homogenization and of whether it leaves enough space for differences among the living.

i) To begin with, pseudo-Aristotle's explanation for the shared nature of vegetal life is quintessentially metaphysical in its ascription of sameness to the most fundamental stratum of the soul. The author of *De plantis* writes that "the nutritive part [of the soul] is the cause [aitia] of the growth of every living thing" (315b33–34). Stemming from a common cause, various individual growths—plants, animals, humans, or other living creatures—are the manifold effects of the same impulse, which is the immutable metaphysical foundation for the innumerable changes that occur in "living things." More gravely still, the static etiology of basic life attempts to tame the proliferations of the vegetal soul by confining them to the effects of a cause that can be known, and hence subjugated to the demands of the rational soul. It is as though in these lines *logos* itself makes a desperate attempt to digest and to assimilate the non-rational part of the psyche, which has staked out the impotence of reason, by explaining this part away through the metaphysical concept of causality. The common is here understood as a synonym of "sameness," as the unexceptional and the inconspicuous *par excellence*, as that which we find wherever living things are found, and as the principle of life in its utmost banality.

ii) Aristotle is more keenly aware of the difference of the vegetal soul than Nicolaus of Damascus, since his comprehension of "commonality" depends on the—admittedly Platonist—notion of participation, *methexis*, congruent with the existential idea of coexistence. "By nutritive faculty," he explains, "I mean that part of the soul [*morion tēs psukhēs*], which even the plants share [*metekhei*: participate in]" (*De anima* 413b7–8). A specific division of the soul, divided in and of itself, is shared by everything that lives; all living beings, including plants, participate in its signature activities of nourishment, growth, and procreation, though plants alone can be said to attain their proper excellence, *arētē*, in the course of this participation (observe that the virtue of plants is restricted to the three activities listed above and therefore,

somewhat more abstractly, to their ability to assimilate the other *and* to become, or to engender, the other).

That this insight is inspired by Plato, for whom *methexis* is one of the privileged articulations of the Idea with its earthly instantiations, becomes obvious when Aristotle describes vegetal propagation in a way reminiscent of *The Symposium*: “For this is the most natural of all functions among living creatures . . . : viz., to reproduce one’s kind, an animal producing an animal, and a plant a plant, in order that they may have a share [*metekkhōsin*] in the immortal and the divine in the only way they can. . . . Since, then, they cannot share in the immortal and divine by continuity of existence . . . they share in these in the only way they can, some to a greater and some to a lesser extent; what persists is not the individual itself, but something in its image [*eidei*], identical not numerically but specifically” (415a27–b9). The Platonic heritage of *De anima* is apparent not just in the usage of the word *eidos* (“idea” or “image”), which supplies the blueprint for the reproduction of various members of the same species, but especially in the aporetic logic of self-preservation, whereby every finite living entity keeps itself intact solely because it manages to replace itself with another like it, so that mortal beings would come to partake of immortality by engendering their offspring.³⁹ For the nutritive-reproductive part of the soul to succeed, it is not enough to assimilate the nourishing other to the nourished same; rather, the exact opposite process—the becoming-other of the same in its progeny—is decisive to a good functioning of *to threptikon*. The incorporation of the other into the same is subordinate to the othering of the same, in that the ongoing maintenance of a finite, perishable organism, dependent upon a regular intake of nutrients, does not accomplish the higher *telos* of the vegetal soul, the goal of sharing or participating in the immortal by producing another like it.

Platonic-Aristotelian “participation” implies at the same time that *to threptikon* can neither embody the divine nor become immortal, because it gains access to these qualities in a non-proprietary way, without laying an absolute claim to them. No plant coincides with the image or *eidos* it replicates (by itself or in its offspring) through its double sharing in

the nutritive part of the soul and in immortality. Its approximation to its *eidos* may be confirmed only in taking stock of what it shares with the other, of what it has in common with the other as other, in whom its trace will live on. And insofar as we, humans, the others of plants or the wholly other plants, likewise participate in *to threptikon*, we complement the image/idea of a plant as a being that grows, reproduces, and shares in the divine, albeit often in a strikingly different mode.

The stress on *eidos* is a crossroads where difference and identity converge. On the one hand, plants and animals partake of immortality by way of vegetal proliferation adapted in each case to their kind of being, a proliferation that is richer, more diverse, and more differentiated than the “common cause” of life isolated in *De plantis*. On the other hand, *eidos*, taken in the sense of the immutable and transcendent Platonic Idea, casts a long shadow of sameness and identity on “the common,” individuated in as many ways as there are species. The difficulty, then, lies in the ambiguity of the concept of individuality, which at the same time singularizes and generalizes the entity it comes to describe; eidetic participation is still far from an adequate expression of the non-essential mode of living-with we have inherited from plants.

iii) In keeping with twentieth-century philosophy, living is “living-with,” cohabitation in a community mediated not by the immutable bonds of a common essence but by the non-essential (or better, pre-essential) difference inherent in existence. The last, and most promising, conception of commonality will correspond to this notion of community by deriving it from difference, having simultaneously dispensed with the individual as the atomic unit of analysis. Hegel and Nietzsche will be the unlikely allies in this endeavor: both will identify the quality of subindividual growth in plants that, in the words of the former thinker, are particular but, in contrast to beings endowed with the animal soul (*Seele*), not yet individualized. Hegel goes on to argue that “in the plant the particularity is quite immediately identical with vitality in general”⁴⁰ and to refer to vegetal life as a proliferation of multiplicities, “this dispersed Spirit,”⁴¹ which Nietzsche will rediscover by way of shattering the unity “plant” into a “millionfold growth.” But what is still

missing from these philosophical interventions is the thesis that instead of describing an imperfect—because open-ended—proliferation, pure multiplicity may facilitate a derivation of the common without the interference of identity, be it a shared cause or a unitary eidetic structure.

Positively understood, the dispersed life of plants is a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with. Dispersed in acts of living, all creatures share something of the vegetal soul and are alive in the most basic sense insofar as they neither coincide with themselves nor remain self-contained, but are infinitely divisible below the death masks of their identities. If this is so then we have a lot to learn from plants that have mastered this way of being, which is their virtue (again, in accord with the ancient meaning of *arētē*), not a vice of insufficient self-idealization and self-universalization, as Hegel would make us believe.

The shared divisibility of all living beings, first honed in the acts of the vegetal soul, pertains to the workings of the soul in general, which already in the texts of Plato and Aristotle is split, often against itself. For the psyche to live, it must receive guidance from the vegetal principle of divisibility, constantly becoming other to itself; in other words, it must be temporal through and through. But also ever since Plato, psychic principles have found their analogs in the realm of the political, even if such parallels have tended to provide a host of metaphysical justifications for a fixed distribution of power in a polity. (Plato's *Republic* is of course a dramatic case in point, given the parallel it draws between the appetitive soul and the workers, the spirited part of the psyche and the guardians, and the rational soul and philosopher-kings.) Hence, adopting Plato's psycho-politics rid of its hierarchical component, I propose the term "vegetal democracy" to designate the potential political effects of plant-soul.⁴²

Both in the life of plants and in vegetal democracy the principles of inherent divisibility and participation are paramount. Inspired by the kind of sharing that marks plant-soul, which traverses all other modes of living while preserving their differences, vegetal democracy is open

not only to *Homo sapiens* but to all species without exception. Like the plant-soul itself, consonant with life's hospitality, it stands for that which is most common and most inclusive, not by formally enveloping its contents but conversely by bringing into relief differences and divisions without which no "sharing," no participation, no "being-with" is possible. Far from furnishing a natural or a naturalized foundation for actual and ideal democratic regimes, it is a paradigm of sharing more basic than any exchanges between "autonomous" individuals. The non-economic generosity of plant-soul, giving itself without reserve to everything and everyone that lives, transcribes vegetal democracy into an ethical politics, free of any expectations of returns from the other. Its divisibility renders irrelevant the task of reconciling particular, individual interests and the universal Good, since what happens below individual unities bears directly upon common well-being.

In sum, vegetal democracy brings together without totalizing all "growing things," that is to say, plants and the things of nature. Like plants, animals and humans too are "growing things," even if in addition to the growth of hair, nails, claws, fur, or feathers, they exhibit other kinds of growth that are experiential, intellectual, and so on. Be this as it may, participation in life—or in the slightly more restricted categories of growth and growing—is not a monolithic principle. In raising the question of the living, we must acknowledge the infinite differentiations, the "striatedness" of the field of vitality, as well as the blurring of clear demarcations between life and death in the wake of Derridian deconstruction. Spectrality (the return of a ghost who/that is neither simply alive nor dead) and survival (a simultaneous continuation *and* suspension of life) are the names Derrida bestows upon the shifting margins of life and death. Mindful of such complexity, vegetal democracy does not advocate a naïve vitalism that would insulate life and the living from death; quite to the contrary, it situates "participation in life" in an intimate relation to mortality.

We might recall here the beginning of our meditation on the meanings of plant life, namely the observation that the speculative sense of "vegetation" is paradoxical and double. "Vegetable" designates a wild and potentially untamable proliferation and at the same time veers on

the side of death, in that it symbolizes immobility and torpor, not to mention the comatose condition, referred to as “persistent vegetative state,” wherein life diminishes to a minimum hardly distinguishable from its opposite. Besides these semantic indications, Aristotle had already construed the mortal nature of plant-soul as the embodiment of finite life, the perishable part of the psyche that does not survive the death of the body. The life of plants is situated on the brink of death, in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead. Those who share in its anarchic principle will not escape this predicament of being on the verge, suspended between life and death, the predicament common to all living beings.

If the vegetal democracy of sharing and participation is an ontological effect of plant-soul, then it must, like this very soul, eschew the metaphysical binaries of self and other, life and death, interiority and exteriority. The plant that has no identity of its own secretly confers a plastic, malleable form upon life in its multiple instantiations and animates the grids of meaning, wherein other living beings operate. Henceforth, every consideration of post-foundational, post-metaphysical ethics and politics worthy of the name must avow the contributions of vegetal life to what contemporary approaches to the common deem so significant: the non-essentialized mode of “living-with. . . .” A reassessment of these contributions will require a further investigation into how plants quietly subvert classical philosophical hierarchies and afford us a glimpse into a lived (and growing) destruction of Western metaphysics.