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on plants, or the origin
of our world

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The Life of Plants

A Metaphysics of Mixture

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Translated by Dylan J. Montanari

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I

On Plants, or the Origin of Our World

We barely speak of them and their name escapes us. Philosophy has always overlooked them, more out of contempt than out of neglect.[1] They are the cosmic ornament, the inessential and multicolored accident that reigns in the margins of the cognitive field. The contemporary metropolis views them as superfluous trinkets of urban decoration. Outside the city walls, they are hosts—weeds—or objects of mass production. Plants are the always open wound of the metaphysical snobbery that defines our culture. The return of the repressed, of which we must rid ourselves in order to consider ourselves as "different": rational humans, spiritual beings. They are the cosmic tumor of humanism, the waste that the absolute spirit can't quite manage to eliminate. The life sciences have neglected them, too.* "Current biology, conceived of on the basis of our

* Translator's note: Unless otherwise specified, all the translations of quotations (French or otherwise) have been made by the book's translator, Dylan J. Montanari, from Coccia's French original. Material in square brackets has also been added by the translator.

knowledge of animals, pays no attention to plants"—"the standard evolutionary literature is zoocentric."[2] And biology manuals approach plants "in bad faith," "as decorations on the tree of life, rather than as the forms that have allowed the tree itself to survive and grow."[3]

The problem is not just one of epistemological deficiency: "as animals, we identify much more immediately with other animals than with plants."[4] In this spirit, scientists, radical ecology, and civil society have fought for decades for the liberation of animals;[5] and affirming the separation between human and animal (the anthropological machine of which philosophy speaks)[6] has become commonplace in the intellectual world. By contrast, it seems that no one ever wanted to question the superiority of animal life over plant life and the rights of life and death of the former over those of the latter. A form of life without personality and without dignity, it does not seem to deserve any spontaneous empathy, or the exercise of a moralism that higher living beings are capable of eliciting.[7] Our animal chauvinism[8] refuses to go beyond "an animal language that does not lend itself to a relation to plant truth."[9] In a sense, antispecies animalism is just another form of anthropocentrism and a kind of internalized Darwinism: it extends human narcissism to the animal realm.

Plants are untouched by this prolonged negligence: they affect a sovereign indifference toward the human world, the culture of civilizations, the succession of domains and ages. Plants seem absent, as though lost in a long, deaf, chemical dream. They don't have senses, but they are far from being shut in on themselves: no other being adheres to the world that surrounds it more

than plants do. They don't have the eyes or ears that may have allowed them to distinguish the forms of the world and to multiply its image through the iridescence of colors and sounds that we give it.[10] They participate in the world in its totality in everything they meet. Plants do not run, they cannot fly; they are not capable of privileging a specific place in relation to the rest of space, they have to remain where they are. Space, for them, does not crumble into a heterogeneous chessboard of geographical difference; the world is condensed into the portion of ground and sky they occupy. Unlike most higher animals, they have no selective relation to what surrounds them: they are, and cannot be other than, constantly exposed to the world around them. Plant life is life as complete exposure, in absolute continuity and total communion with the environment. It is for the sake of adhering as much as possible to the world that they develop a body that privileges surface over volume: "In plants, the very high proportion of surface to volume is one of the most characteristic traits. It is through this vast surface, literally spread in the environment, that plants absorb from the space the diffuse resources that are necessary to their growth."[11] Their absence of movement is nothing but the reverse of their complete adhesion to what happens to them and their environment. One cannot separate the plant—*neither physically nor metaphysically*—from the world that accommodates it. It is the most intense, radical, and paradigmatic form of being in the world. To interrogate plants means to understand what it means to be in the world. Plants embody the most direct and elementary connection that life can establish with the world. The opposite is equally true: the plant is the purest observer when it comes to

contemplating the world in its totality. Under the sun or under the clouds, mixing with water and wind, their life is an endless cosmic contemplation, one that does not distinguish between objects and substances—or, to put differently, one that accepts all their nuances to the point of melting with the world, to the point of coinciding with its very substance. We will never be able to understand a plant unless we have understood what the world is.

Notes

Notes to Chapter 1

1 The only great exception in modernity is the masterpiece by Gustav Theodor Fechner, *Nanna oder über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen* (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1848). Against this great silence, the voice of a small number of researchers and intellectuals has begun to rise, so much so that one hears talk of a "plant turn." See Elaine P. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology of the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michael Marder, *Plant Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Michael Marder, *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); and Jeffrey Nealon, *Plant Theory: Biopower and*

Vegetable Life (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). With a few exceptions (more or less), this literature insists on finding the truth about plants in purely *philosophical* or anthropological research, without having any truck with contemporary botanical thought—which, on the contrary, has produced remarkable masterpieces in the philosophy of nature. Here are only those that have influenced me most: Agnes Arber, *The Natural Philosophy of Plant Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950); David Beerling, *The Emerald Planet: How Plants Changed Earth's History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniel Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (New York: Scientific American / Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012); Edred John Henry Corner, *The Life of Plants* (Cleveland: World, 1964); Karl J. Niklas, *Plant Evolution: An Introduction to the History of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Sergio Stefano Tonzig, *Letture di biologia vegetale* (Milan: Mondadori, 1975); François Hallé, *Éloge de la plante: Pour la nouvelle biologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1999); Stefano Mancuso and Alessandra Viola, *Verde brillante: Sensibilità e intelligenza nel mondo vegetale* (Florence: Giunti, 2013). Attention to plants is also central in contemporary American anthropology, starting with Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's masterpiece *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), which is indeed centered around a mushroom, and with the works of Natasha Myers, who is also preparing a book on the subject. See especially

Natasha Myers and Carla Hustak, "Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 23.3 (2012): 74–117.

2 François Hallé, *Éloge de la plante: Pour une nouvelle biologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1999), p. 321. Along with Niklas, Hallé is a botanist who has made the great effort to transform the contemplation of the life of plants into a properly metaphysical object of study.

3 Niklas, *Plant Evolution*, p. viii.

4 W. Marshall Darley, "The Essence of Plantness," *American Biology Teacher*, 52.6 (1990): 354–7, here p. 356.

5 Among the most famous examples, see Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975) [reissued several times], and Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009). But the debate is very old: see the two great works of antiquity, one by Plutarch, *On the Intelligence of Animals* [*De sollertia animalium*], the other by Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals* [*De abstinentia*]. On the history of the debate, see Renan Larue, *Le Végétarisme et ses ennemis: Vingt-cinq siècles de débates* (Paris: PUF, 2015). The debate over animals, which is strongly marked by an extremely superficial moralism, seems to forget that heterotrophy presupposes the killing of other living beings as a natural and necessary dimension of life.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003) [originally published as *L'aperto:*

L'uomo e l'animale (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002)].

The debate over the rights of plants exists in a very minor form—at least since the famous chapter 27 in Samuel Butler, *Erewhon, or, Over the Range* (London: Trubner & co., 1872) until the classic article by Christopher D. Stone, "Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects," *Southern California Law Review*, 45 (1972): 450–501. On these questions, see the useful summary of philosophical debates in Marder, *Plant Thinking*, as well as the position expounded in Hall, *Plants as Persons*.

Darley, "Essence of Plantness," p. 356. See also J. L. Arbor, "Animal Chauvinism, Plant-Regarding Ethics and the Torture of Trees," *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, 64.3 (1986): 335–69.

Hallé, *Éloge de la plante*, p. 325.

On the question of the *senses* of plants, see Chamovitz, *What a Plant Knows* and Richard Karban, *Plant Sensing and Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). The limitation of these works resides nonetheless in the stubborn attempt to "rediscover" organs "analogous" to those that make perception possible in animals without trying at all to imagine—starting from plants and their morphology—another possible form of the existence of perception, another way of thinking the relation between sensation and body.

Darley, "Essence of Plantness," p. 354. The question of the surface and of exposure to the world is central to Fechner, *Nanna* and to Hallé, *Éloge de la plante*. On the matter of the relation to the world,

see Marder, *Plant Thinking*, which represents the most profound philosophical work on the nature of plant life.

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