

Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder

*Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives*

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The first volume in Columbia's exciting Critical Life Studies edited series, Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder's *Through Vegetal Being*, presents a full season-cycle's correspondence between two thoughtful authors. In the classical European tradition of exploring a topic and oneself through exchanging letters (by post!) with an illustrious colleague, Irigaray nonetheless balks at the idea that their communications are in any way traditional or predictable: 'if readers imagine that they will find in this volume a traditional dialogue about vegetal being, they might be surprised. But if they believe that they will discover here what a dialogue in difference could be, they are also mistaken' (p. 101). Marder too rejects the notion that their conversation bears any of the familiarities of the style or genre of collected letters between two authors. He writes that answering directly to one another would have been as deficient and inauthentic as mirroring one another, and thus 'responding obliquely ... maintain[s], as much as possible, what is untranslatable in language, including in the first instance, in the language of plants' (p. 215). What then, exactly, is this enigmatic book about?

The dialogue of these celebrated continental philosophers, one an eminent feminist thinker, the other arguably the best known contemporary plant philosopher, wends an unusual path. Rather than directly responding to each other, the book presents first Irigaray's letters in their entirety, each given a chapter heading, such as 'Cultivating our Sensory Perceptions' and 'Losing Oneself and Asking Nature for Help Again'. Marder then writes a parallel set of letters according to the same headings and themes, but presents fully unique contributions. Often the parallel chapters intersect ever so slightly, yet significantly, taking the germ of an idea from the other and developing ramifying personal and philosophical investigations from that single aureole. Each finishes their respective part with an epilogue directly writing to the other interlocutor, confronting the event of the letter exchange becoming the book.

Both thinkers are resolute in their rejection of metaphysics. Irigaray presents an embodied nature influenced by Vedic and Eastern philosophy, acknowledging that like plants, for us 'the first food is air' (p. 23). She notes that 'care of the atmosphere and of the beings that maintain it' first appeared as a cause for her in the 1970s as 'almost as difficult to defend as that of women's liberation' (p. 22). And Irigaray laments that 'our societies' remain 'unconcerned about air and breathing' (p. 23). Echoing almost David Abram's paean to air in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Irigaray grounds her responsibility to the natural world, and especially to plants, the progenitors of oxygen, in the 'universal communion through air' that all living, land-dwelling beings share (p. 41). Both Irigaray and Marder remind us that bathing in nature's intelligence through our multiple senses compels us to respond not through words, but also in kind through a full-bodied, active experiencing of life through our full sensual architecture.

The language of words for both authors appears flaccid in the face of the cornucopia of communicative modalities plants (and humans) offer. 'To substitute words for elements', Marder

writes, ‘is to replace a human life for all life and, indeed, to favor only a small cross-section of human existence, while being inattentive to bodily needs and to our immersion in the elemental ... By giving words as universal equivalents for everything and everyone that is, we take away from the world much more than we provide it with’ (p. 192). Thus, the imperialism of syntactically-regimented, symbolically-rigid language, for both interlocutors, misses the generosity of plants, which instead prepare the soil and order the elements through their growth and decay, for future generations of life. Indeed, part of the formidable challenge, Marder writes, is to develop a philosophical language that can ‘approximate the world of plants ... without, at the same time, violating the silence of plants’ (p. 113). Rather than ‘process[ing] plants through [the] indifferent conceptual machinery’ (p. 113) of traditional metaphysics, as has historically been the case with philosophers such as Hegel, Kant and even Derrida, both Marder and Irigaray aim to move beyond both metaphysics and nihilism, towards a sort of ‘vegetal existentialism’.

Of course, for Irigaray, this nascent plant logic also requires breaking free of the logic of sameness for sexuality; and for her this logic can be found ‘in the respect for the difference(s) between living beings, beginning with us as differently sexuated’ (p. 101). As the book’s title suggests, working through the patriarchal dichotomies of Western metaphysics occurs through thinking vegetal life. While both authors lean heavily on Nietzsche and Heidegger, close readers will delight in novel readings of Antigone, rehabilitations of Aristotle, revival of the German Romantics, and the surprising (anti-)Catholic origins of the word ‘hoax’ (listen up, Senator James Inhofe!) in *hoc est corpus meum*, the transubstantiation of (wheat) bread into the body of Christ.

The astonishingly intimate yet philosophically intense chapters creates a push-pull effect between high environmental philosophy and personal storytelling. Between boredom (perhaps Heidegger’s ‘deep boredom’?) and conceptual acrobatics, the slim yet dense volume renegotiates the terms of plant philosophy, further developing Marder’s mature work on vegetal existence. In taking up the Nietzschean and Heideggerian insights of the exhaustion of the western tradition, both authors press: what is a vegetal logic?

Beyond the confines of philosophy that remains in ivory tower intellectualism, the plant world rebukes attempts to deny the sensate part of ourselves which always already is at the mercy of our surrounding ecology.

Like circumnutations of a plant’s tendril, unhurriedly circling and stretching before it decides on a direction of growth and branching, the book relates an almost unendingly preliminary feel; as if the decorum, throat-clearing, and anecdotes are with all patience preparing the soil for what might come. The hoped for steps beyond metaphysics, language, and shift in tradition that the book hungers for have not yet come, but must be conceived as moving at the cultural equivalent of observing a growing plant.

YOGI HALE HENDLIN  
University of California, San Francisco  
[yhh@yogihendlin.com](mailto:yhh@yogihendlin.com)