

Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder
Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives
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A sustained meditation on the importance of vegetal life for philosophy, *Through Vegetal Being* is a co-authored monograph by Luce Irigaray and Michael Marder. At once a personal, philosophical, and political text, the book elaborates previously published and forthcoming work by both authors. The central argument returns the reader to the vital importance of vegetal life in the ethical, social, personal, and political life of the human, offering a vivified approach to plant being as a way to correct the misguided/violent orientations and deadening nihilism at the heart of Western metaphysics. Approaching vegetal being without attempting to master it, they argue, offers us a different and more ethical return to the fundamental elements of life. Deploying a hermeneutical approach--Marder calls it a "lived hermeneutics"--the authors argue that a return to nature (Marder, invoking the Greeks, calls it *phusis*) enables a return to life and a better kind of being in common.

At stake for both authors is a model of existing and living in/as difference in ethical relation that allows both human and nonhuman to unfold, each in their own unique expression, without consuming the other. For Irigaray, being in difference turns on our ability to recognize sexuate difference, whereas for Marder, an ethical orientation to human being/becoming necessitates the recognition of vegetal difference. The book's title, *Through Vegetal Being*, draws attention to Heidegger's distinction between being, and the being of beings, and writes within his corrective to the collapse between them. Doing so, the authors call for attentiveness to the ways in which we, as well as nonhuman others, are enfolded within a dynamic state of becoming. The authors are clear that the book intervenes into a moment in which, in Irigaray's words, "all the living beings who inhabit [the earth] are in danger." For both authors, "the preservation of the vegetal world is crucial for trying to save the planet" (99).

The monograph is divided into two parts, each comprised of a prologue, sixteen chapters, and an epilogue. The titles of each of the sixteen chapters are shared across the two parts, with Irigaray's writing comprising the first half of the book and Marder's the second. What this structure affords is a kind of phyllotaxis, a style in which the writings of both authors emerge from the same stem and grow outwards, toward divergent orientations and openings. As such, the book can be read in the traditional way from beginning to end, or by reading the corresponding chapters by both authors before progressing to the next. Reading the book in this nonlinear way enables the reader

to dwell more fully in the correspondence between the authors, cultivating an approach to the doing of philosophy as a doing/being in common. This stylistic choice on the part of the authors is one of book's strongest contributions to the field of feminist philosophy, interrupting the robotic output and machinic consumption of academic work and inviting the reader to *make something* from what Marder calls "the silences, the lacunae, the gaps . . . where more is happening than in the printed words themselves" (215). The book is at its best in the autobiographical/anecdotal detail offered by both authors. Rich in evocative detail, there are moments of stillness in the text in which a susurrant of wind seems almost to move from/through the pages; the book is, at times, hauntingly, strikingly beautiful.

In the co-written preface, which precedes the splitting of the book in two, the authors explain that their concern about the current state of nature and the living compelled them to write a book together. "Our approaches to the problem were quite different," they explain. "It will be up to the readers to find the most fecund manner of broaching our contributions, that is, to perceive at once the main message concerning vegetal being and our different ways of dealing with it " (ix). The roadmap the authors offer for interpreting these differences is helpful and provides an orientation with which to begin the book. The authors point out, for instance, that Marder "thinks of the vegetal world as such and searches for the tracks of its presence in the authors of our tradition in order to provide this tradition with a new understanding and impact" (x). This approach is congruent with Irigaray's methodological commitments, but is not identical to her own particular argument, which, she writes, "focuses more on the need to modify our conception of subjectivity in order to become able to give birth to a new way of being and existing, especially with regard to the living world" (x).

The chapters in this volume are too numerous to précis. And doing so, I believe, would be to walk carelessly over the internal ecology the book establishes, to treat the richness of description as incidental rather than polemical. Instead, taking seriously the authors' deliberately nonlinear approach to the material, which, in form as well as in content, urges readers to clear *their own* path toward "a new way of being and behaving" (xi), I will instead offer one interpretive approach I find to be particularly fecund. This has been to treat the first seven chapters of the book as a meditation on how and why we might stage a return to vegetal being. The next four chapters can be usefully engaged as a meditation by both authors on being human and coming, through nature, into relation with the self. The final five chapters consider the theme of being in common, being with others. For both authors, this involves an inquiry into language and how we might re-approach the fundamental elements upon which Western metaphysics has been erected in order to come into a more ethical relation with the other and the living world, human and nonhuman.

The central theme that fans out from and across both parts of the book is the return to nature, the lived hermeneutics that informs this approach, and the corresponding critique of prevailing metaphysical thought. Toward this theme, Irigaray and Marder begin by reflecting upon the vegetal world, upon seeking refuge there and what this has meant in the context of their own lexicon of experience, both in their experience of being human, and in the development of their philosophical lives. For both authors, the vegetal world has, at times, offered shelter and refuge, even retreat. For Irigaray, the vegetal world has, since her infancy, been a favorite dwelling, a place where the longing for life was nurtured and cultivated. Recalling that it was from nature

rather than humans that she asked for help, she writes, "I had to go back to the gardens to care for life itself" (12). Writing on Antigone, she reflects upon the sharing of breath and the joining together of life with thought, so long shunned in Western philosophical traditions. "Instead of teaching me how to cultivate my breathing," she writes, "my culture had taught me to suspend my breath in words, ideas, ideals--something that led me to breathe in an artificial way and left me breathless" (20). "Air," she later states, evoking her earlier work on the elements (especially *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* [Irigaray 1999]), "put us into living relations even if we did not assume the same role with respect to it. Through air I participated in a universal exchange . . . I took part in a universal sharing" (21).

For Marder, the vegetal world indicates a kind of rootedness connected to place. He reflects upon his peripatetic past, noting that in each of the places he was uprooted from, "plants have become the keepsakes of my memories, the mnemonic centers of gravity that evoke the events and even the atmosphere of my life at the time" (118). In Marder's narration of the semantics rooted in plants, the violence of the uprooting of the olive groves in Palestine by the Israeli army stands out as an indication of the gravitas with which the vegetal world is, for him, imbued. He writes: "the uprooting of trees reinforced a transformation of the entire population--the entire people--into refugees, prevented from seeking meaning and refuge (even) in the vegetal world. To my eyes these actions, already decried in ancient laws that intuited in the uprooting of trees the declaration of total war without a chance for reconciliation, completed the destruction of Israeli legitimacy" (119). "Nothing will do," he concludes, "than reversing the direction of culture and reconceiving it as a loving cultivation of the vegetal world and of the living" (120). He writes, invoking Heidegger's words in "The Origin of the Work of Art," at bottom, the pines, and all plants, "not only *are* but also create a world . . . which does not take the shape of a closed dwelling but leads toward the edge of another world" (121).

For both authors, the re/turn to nature they suggest is specific in its mode of unfolding. This is not a naïve, neo-pastoral, or neo-Luddite text, and to read it as such would very much be to miss the point. Both Irigaray and Marder recognize the limitations of contemporary Western philosophical language to elaborate vegetal being: its tendency to make objects/pieces of property of the world, which unfolds within the structure of language itself. By staging a return to nature and vegetal being, 1) through the corporeal experience and specificity of sexuate difference and in defiance of a tradition that seeks transcendence of the sexuate body to the realm of the thought or idea (for Irigaray), and 2) through the footprints Western metaphysical tradition has left across the skin of the earth (for Marder), the authors offer a way to correct the course of Western metaphysics before it falls into nihilism. This nihilism is characterized by viewing the living world as a series of objects/pieces of property, inert and available to be capitalized upon in ignorance of the interconnectivity between the human and nonhuman living worlds. Marder is specific in his claim that this tendency is leading, rapidly, to a global environmental crisis. "That the world is crumbling is not surprising," he writes, "seeing that it has been analyzed by pure understanding hostile to life. . . . Theoretical understanding grows, when it does, at the expense of life, which it breaks down into particles that are already dead and have nothing to do with the elements" (193). He continues, "Through words and, above all, through numeric symbols, it substitutes life with death, which it clothes in the dignity of a presumed higher existence, 'the life of the mind'" (193). For Irigaray, this distancing results in an inability to be two together, in love

and in communion. For Marder, the impacts are the devastation of the living world in the form of climate change, deforestation, pollution, and looming environmental disaster.

Ultimately, both thinkers see possibilities for philosophy, which Marder defines, strategically, as "the love of wisdom" (209), to "cultivate the soul by showering light and heat onto it, that is to say, the very things that plants also require for growth" (209). Such a call will no doubt find detractors in many corners of the discipline/academy. Writing on the ethical possibilities embodied in the holding in tension of lichen--not a single organism as many might think, but rather a benign parasitic symbiosis between (at least) two living entities--I have experienced some of the opprobrium Marder faced following the publication of his essay, "If Peas Can Talk, Should We Eat Them?" in the *New York Times* (Marder 2012). The vitriol Marder's essay was met with resonates with the censure Irigaray faced following the publication of *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray 1985). As Irigaray narrates early in the book, she found herself cast entirely out of her academic home and social circle; Marder, for his part, faced death threats. My essay was eviscerated on social-media platforms by an elite coterie of what have alternatively been called hard or positivist social scientists. I think the looming word here is "real." In her review of the monograph for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, Elaine P. Miller writes, "both Irigaray and Marder make quick references that only philosophers might catch, *but in ways that are not precise enough to satisfy the philosopher's desire for an argument*" (Miller 2016; emphasis added). What Miller seems to be suggesting is that "real" philosophers make arguments; what the responses to both Irigaray's and Marder's work tell us is that we have not yet found a way to share the world. Evaluating the book by criteria beyond its internal purpose and promise, to critique the book for a paucity of argumentation, is to miss its aim and is manifestly unfair. It also indicates, to paraphrase Irigaray, that we have not yet found the language we need to shift our culture from its focus on appearance, to appearing.

The book blends Irigaray's politics and poetics with Marder's phenomenological commitments and will be of interest to readers with investments in feminist philosophy writ large as well as readers of new materialism, posthumanism, and phenomenology. Marder's commitment to deconstructionism will resonate with those who think within this ethos, particularly those who wish to work through and beyond Derridean thought. Irigaray's attentiveness to the specificity of sexuate being in difference is a meaningful intervention into metaphysical traditions that obfuscate bodily difference toward a realm of the pure idea. The book contributes meaningfully to conversations on ethical relations between human and nonhuman others. Marder's lived hermeneutics offers a way we might begin to approach nature without forgetting or annihilating it, approaching it again in a different way, rejecting "the sham heroism or separation from nature and the tragic heroism of a nostalgic return to it as a fictional lost object" (198). The book is eminently readable and can be approached from multiple directions. Readers already familiar with Irigaray's thought and Heidegger's philosophy of phenomenological hermeneutics will be best equipped to take this book on. This being said, the work of both authors is inviting and enticingly personal. Irigaray's writing is particularly approachable here, to the degree that readers unfamiliar with her work might find this a very good introduction to her other more difficult work. At all points, both authors are always circling back again to the theme of life and of vegetal being as a way to begin again with ourselves and with our being in difference in common.

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