



REVIEW ESSAY

Bad Flowers: The Implications of a Phytocentric Deconstruction of the Western Philosophical Tradition for the Environmental Humanities

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ABSTRACT This is an experimental review essay responding to Michael Marder's *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). The essay departs from the ordinary structure of comparing three books on a similar theme. Instead three of Marder's concepts, plant "nourishment," "desire" and "language" are explored through readings of Gabrielle de Vietri's installation *The Garden of Bad Flowers* (2014), the story of Daphne from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) and Alice's encounter with talking flowers in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). In some ways this essay is like a work of applied theory whereby philosophical concepts are used to advance interpretations of works of art and literature. But, at the same time and in contrast, the works of art and literature brought into dialogue with Marder help to interpret and mobilise the philosopher's concepts. Ultimately, this essay articulates how Marder's strikingly negative critical project is both lively and useful for the Environmental Humanities, especially the fields of ecocriticism and critical plant studies. Moreover, in contrast to many book reviews that begin with summaries of the text and end with suggestions as to where the author might go next, this essay follows that formula for the opening paragraphs, but then suggests where we as readers might go with some key concepts instead.

The main objective of this essay is to think through Marder's claim that "plants ... are not mere objects to be studied and classified; they are also agents in the production of meaning."¹ Marder defines "meaning" in a very broad sense, as both what is implied or explicitly signified and what is communicated. The inference is that plants do not just receive their significance from humans, but instead are actively involved in the process of signification in a range of ways. For those already convinced by Marder's argument, this claim will be easy to agree with. Discerning the critical implications of situating plants as agential meaning-makers capable of meddling with ostensibly human sign systems is more difficult. Thus, I take up Marder's notions of plant "nourishment," "desire" and "language" to explore this question further. I have chosen these concepts because they directly challenge human exceptionalist modes of thought. I then

¹ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 35.

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apply the ideas to interpret works of art and literature where humans have used or represented plants, but in some way diminish their agency. This is not to say that they are bad or inferior works of art, but just that there is scope for rethinking the role of the plant within these examples. The works in question are Gabrielle de Vietri's installation *The Garden of Bad Flowers* (2014), the story of Daphne from Ovid's epic poem *Metamorphoses* (8 CE) and Lewis Carroll's talking flowers from *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871). Reading these works enables me to clearly illustrate how Marder's concepts provoke a hermeneutic shift from an anthropocentric to a "phyto-centric" critical position.² In sum, this essay explores how critical and interpretive practices change when Marder's conceptualisation of plants is taken up, even in the largely philosophical terms defined in *Plant-thinking*.

Before proceeding with this task, a general understanding of Marder's project is useful. *Plant-thinking* draws almost entirely on the Western philosophical canon, including Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Derrida, Nancy, Heidegger and Agamben, and brings a life form that has largely occupied the margins to the centre of this philosophical tradition. His aim is to write plants back into the history of Western metaphysics and to deconstruct what he deems to be an animal-centric philosophical tradition at the same time.

While Marder's book is widely celebrated for its originality, ambition and scope, some of the central criticisms of this stage of his plant project are that it is too Western, strangely barren and overly broad.³ First, Marder's work would have benefited from a more rigorous engagement with non-Western and non-anthropocentric thought. Second, he could have cultivated direct encounters with plants themselves. Third, he takes plants as a monolithic category of life, rather than exploring the extraordinary diversity of the botanical world. Alongside these criticisms, Marder's methodology is quite different to extant examples of critical plant studies which are generally interdisciplinary, take plants as *a priori* agential and draw on, among other things, environmental philosophy, plant neurobiology, queer theory, botanical science, semiotics and process philosophy to extend our thinking about the place of plants in our lively world.⁴ In contrast, Marder's philosophical exegesis binds him to thinking plants within the conventional disciplinary bounds of a rigid scholarly tradition that has historically marginalised such forms of life.

² See Michael Marder, "For a Phytocentrism to Come," *Environmental Philosophy*, Online First, May 2014.

³ See Dominic Pettman, "The Noble Cabbage," *L.A. Review of Books*, accessed 19 October 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/the-noble-cabbage-michael-marders-plant-thinking/>; Jeffrey T. Nealon's review in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, accessed 19 October 2015, <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/39002-plant-thinking-a-philosophy-of-vegetal-life/>; Catherine Fullarton's review in *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 (2014): 377-378.

⁴ See Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers, "Involutionary Momentum: Affective Ecologies and the Sciences of Plant/Insect Encounters," *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 74-118; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, but especially her contribution to *Environmental Humanities*, "Plant Stories," <http://environmentalhumanities.org/2013/10/01/editorial-profile-catriona-sandilands/>; Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013); Randi Laist, ed., *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013); and the forthcoming collection edited by Patricia Vierira, Gagliano, Monica and John Ryan, *The Green Thread: Dialogues with the Vegetal World* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

Although I agree with these criticisms, what I really like about Marder's project is his direct fight with the anthropocentric philosophical hegemony. Moreover, while I am generally sceptical of the "Trojan horse" strategy of trying to take structures down from within, Marder's disciplinary rigour makes his ambush of the canon particularly successful. The result is a revelation of plant difference. In other words, plants do things that humans and animals do—they desire, they seek and secure nourishment and communicate in a form of language—but they do so in strikingly different ways. By reflecting on how the conceptual differences between plant and animal/human life interrupt and potentially shape human signification systems, Marder's work contributes to the posthumanist project of decentring the human by specifically challenging the long philosophical tradition that supports human exceptionalism in its own terms.

Plant Nourishment (*The Garden of Bad Flowers*)

For Marder, one of the key ways in which plants are agents in the production of meaning is their capacity to nourish themselves. In contrast to most animals, a category that here includes humans, who have to move around in order to hunt or forage for food, plants lack this obvious locomotive capacity and so they have to find nutrition in other ways. Despite being ostensibly immobile, in the sense that they have roots planted in the ground rather than legs, fins, tails or wings, plants metabolise water and nutrients from the soil through their roots, and air and the light of the sun through their leaves.⁵ It is through this unique capacity for nourishment that they grow and change, or "spread themselves on the surface of the planet"⁶ and produce their own significance. The story of the basil planted in Gabrielle de Vietri's installation, *The Garden of Bad Flowers (The Garden)* offers a way of understanding the idea of plant nutrition as a kind of meaning-making process that troubles human systems of signification as well. This observation then opens up space for a critique of the artwork in a way that accounts for the basil's own mode of being.

The Garden was commissioned for the 2014 Biennale of Sydney, but it is now in my backyard in the Sydney suburb of Earlwood.⁷ With a large-scale state-funded artwork on our

⁵ The immobility of plants is a contentious topic, but certainly from the perspective of the human, an individual plant does not appear to move in the same way as an individual animal does. Here I write in concert with the phenomenological perspective that Marder maps in his book: plants do not appear to walk around and, to a large extent our understanding of plants is based on this assumption.

⁶ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 41.

⁷ The artwork is in my backyard because I met the artist through a friend of a friend on Facebook. She was looking for performance lectures as part of her installation. I contracted to be part of her work when something major happened. A Sydney scholar and activist, Matthew Kiem, called for artists to boycott the Biennale due to links between their founding sponsor, Transfield, and the Australian Government's offshore detention of asylum seekers seeking refuge in Australia. De Vietri is an activist and became the spokesperson for the boycotting artists. Her work was one of the first withdrawn in protest. The boycott had a lot of media coverage. When Transfield's Luca Belgiorno Netti resigned from the board of the Biennale, most of the boycotting artists decided to participate in the exhibition. De Vietri, in contrast, decided to remain boycotted for two main reasons. Firstly, because this year's event was still funded by Transfield and she viewed the split between the two entities as designed to make the "problem" go away, rather than any especially principled move on the part of the Biennale. Second, because as she began working with the plants by this point, their liveliness became more

doorstep, the responsibility for its care weighs heavily on our shoulders. Tending a plant-based artwork is almost a nightmare for an aesthete, largely because despite the weight of the responsibility, our “response-ability”⁸ is limited; that is to say, beyond watering the plants and applying the odd dose of fertiliser, we have very little control over the plants themselves. They are there for the art. The work consists of 16 large planter boxes, 12 tonnes of soil and hundreds of plants brought together not because they make good companions, but because they were understood negatively in the British and European floriographic traditions of the 18th and 19th centuries. The artist determined the layout of the plants in advance and while some provisions were made in the installation for the plants’ need for sunlight, other important factors such as soil quality, viable companion plants and variable water needs were not considered in great detail. It was the historical significance that de Vietri used to bring these “malicious” magnoliophyta together.

Of course the plants do not identify in this way. They are trying to nourish themselves by metabolising water, minerals and sunlight that care little for the floriographic tradition. The garden was meant to be abundant and beautiful and surprise the visitor by offering a pleasant aesthetic experience in contrast to the plants’ historically negative meanings, such as injustice (hops) and despair (grief), for example. Suffice to say, the garden did not grow as planned. This is not due to neglect, but largely because the plants are developing unevenly and at a radically different pace to the events and open days we held to exhibit these plants and their negative significances.⁹

Take the basil as an example. Basil signifies ‘hatred’ in the historical traditions explored by the artist. Of the dozens of basil seedlings planted for the garden, only a few developed into proper plants beyond their emergent growth. It turns out that despite planning with regards to sunlight, the spot selected for these seedlings is still too shady for most of the little ones to grow (figure 1). Some very lucky plants and a few other sidekicks photosynthesised a bit more sunlight than their siblings because of a surprising gap in the foliage of one of the trees on the western side of the yard. Thus, the ones with almost accidental access to about an hour’s more sun grew to between 20 and 50 centimetres more than the others during the time the exhibition was open to the public. But the majority did not grow and waited in the cold wintry soil for the earth to move around the sun, for the south pole to be tilted toward its rays and for the antipodean days to grow longer once more. *The Garden’s* abundance did come, but not until Spring provided more light for the seedlings’ nutrition.¹⁰

apparent and in a temporary installation on an island, their lives were somehow devalued. They’d be better, she said, tended by a group of people at my home, which we call Earlwood Farm. For more information on de Vietri’s diverse body of work see <http://www.gabrielledevietri.com/>

⁸ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 89.

⁹ These events were documented in a series of posts on the Earlwood Farm blog “Letting Mara In: Installing the Garden of Bad Flowers,” “The Opening of the Garden of Bad Flowers,” “Supermoon, Diego Bonetto and the Garden of Bad Flowers,” “Antony Loewenstein on Boycotts at the Garden of Bad Flowers.”

¹⁰ This section started life as a post on the Earlwood Farm blog, http://earwoodfarm.com/bad_basil/



Figure 1. Basil in *The Garden of Bad Flowers*, June 2014. Photograph by author.

One way of reading this lively patchiness is as a criticism of both the artist's process and my labour as caretaker of the artwork; a work of this order requires more than just the planting of plants in boxes, but rather a long-term strategy for cultivating the desired abundance. That said, the work is better off at my home than in a major institution, governed by the anthropocentric time-lines common to all major arts events and institutions. The plants were transplanted in the antipodean April and exhibited over Winter, which is not a time when most seedlings and saplings experience a period of growth. And, taking into account the last minute shift in location for the exhibition of the artwork, from a place within Biennale to a suburban backyard, such planning would be even more difficult.¹¹

But rather than just describing the work as a failure because the anticipated outcome did not materialise in the appropriate time frame, Marder's notion of "plant nourishment" enables a new set of questions about the work to emerge. How are the plants "agents in the production of meaning" in this artwork? How do the plants themselves participate in the creation of the work? The contention here is that this failure of the basil to grow to the desired aesthetic following the timeline of the exhibition, reveals the potential gap between the meanings that flowers have been awarded by humans historically and the meanings plants generate in themselves by gathering nutrients from the soil and sun and growing into larger plants. In the context of *The Garden*, the plants are supposed to deliver a paradoxical surprise that a fragrant and healthy herb could be thought to signify hatred, but the basil plants did not deliver this significance due to lack of nourishment. By way of a lack of nourishment then, the basil's particular mode of becoming-with light, air, water, minerals and nutrients becomes apparent.

Moreover, these plants are also active in redefining the word "bad" in the work's title, *The Garden of Bad Flowers*. Where "bad" previously referred to the human meanings given to the plants, these plants are now bad in the sense that they are physically disobedient and

¹¹ This last minute move is discussed above in footnote 7.

disruptive, like bad kids in the playground refusing to play by the rules. But they are not just “bad apples,” or exceptions to the rule. Rather they demonstrate a deeper truth; when making artwork with living plants, artists will always be collaborating with the plants themselves and they will take a role in shaping the artwork. Indeed, if we want to work with live plants as collaborators in the production of art, both individuals and institutions would likely benefit from what Marder describes as “respect for plant time;”¹² respecting plant time means allowing plants to grow when they grow. Respectful creative collaboration can happen if, and only if, the different temporality inhabited by plants is factored into the artistic process.¹³ For, as this “bad” basil has shown us, they are active in the creative process anyway because they are agents in the production of meaning.

Plant Desire (Daphne)

Human desires have long shaped our reading practices. As narrative theorist Peter Brooks long ago argued, writers’ encourage their readers to identify with the hero of their story and by way of that identification we comprehend the overall meaning of a narrative.¹⁴ Although feminist and queer theorists have laboured to promote alternative models for reading desire,¹⁵ our interpretation of story is routinely shaped by this phallogocentric habit. Moreover, even guided by feminist and queer theory, reading remains a largely anthropocentric practice. Rethinking plant desire by way of Marder offers a way of decentering both masculine and human desire as the primary mode of apprehending meaning in story, while at the same time recognising the more-than-human world of plants. Here I will unfold this idea by taking up Marder’s concept of “plant desire” in a reading of the story of Daphne from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

In the margins of Western philosophy, the question of whether or not plants desire has circulated since the Classical age. In *Plant-thinking* Marder takes a side in the debate and argues that plants do desire, but not in any conventional way of understanding the concept. Marder’s position rejects the idea of desire as an explicitly individualised sexual drive to reproduce; moreover, it is contrary to the idea that plants are able to capture human desires for their benefit, which Michael Pollan famously argues in the popular work *The Botany of*

¹² Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 183.

¹³ Fortunately, due to the boycott action, de Vietri’s work remains *in situ* at the Farm giving the plants much more time than allowed by the Biennale to do their thing.

¹⁴ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 39.

¹⁵ There are many important works that should be considered in these discourses. A good point of departure for the established field of feminist narrative studies is Laura Mulvey’s famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3, Autumn (1975): 6-18 and Nancy K. Miller’s book *The Heroine’s Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980). Whereas Lee Edelman’s polemic *No Future: Queer theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Elizabeth Freeman’s *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) offer more recent interventions into our understanding of narrative from the perspective of queer theory.

Desire.¹⁶ Rather, it is more closely aligned with what John Ryan calls *floraesthesia*, which is a way of “theoretically articulating the bodily complexities between flora and humans ... where the ‘rational subject’ (i.e. the human) and the ‘perceptual object’ (i.e. the wildflower) are immersed in a field of sensation where subject/object binaries do not hold.”¹⁷

In *Plant-thinking* plants’ desire for nourishment and the unique way in which such desire is satisfied, challenges how we understand desire itself.¹⁸ For Marder, plant desire reveals their radical ontology: “The plant is the most desiring being of all, precisely because it is the one most dependent on exteriority.”¹⁹ Plants are, for Marder, superficial beings. All surfaces of a plant’s body want something from the world. This vegetal polymorphous perversity does not strive to develop into any normative model of desire tied to sexual organs or sexual dimorphism and reproduction; instead, plant reproduction is largely accidental and non-monogamous, inter-elemental and interspecies; sunlight, birds, bees, flying foxes, humans, gravity, wind and water are all involved. The “superficial” and yet transgressive model of desire presents the opportunity to rethink the structure of desire in the story of Daphne’s metamorphosis into a tree.

The story goes like this. Cupid plays a trick on Apollo by shooting two arrows “one is for rousing attraction, the other is meant to repel it;”²⁰ the arrows hit Apollo and Daphne respectively. Apollo then rabidly pursues Daphne and she flees his advances. Daphne eventually calls to her father for help and he responds with the gift of metamorphosis:

She had hardly ended her prayer when a heavy numbness
came over her body; her soft white bosom was ringed in a layer
of bark, her hair was turned into foliage, her arms into branches.
The feet that had run so nimbly were sunk into sluggish roots;
her head was confined in a treetop; and all that remained was her beauty.²¹

The conventional way of reading this story is to see Daphne as a symbol of chastity, virginity and beauty, but with very little desire of her own. Historically she is revered and reified as chastity because the metamorphosis allows her to escape Apollo’s sexual desire and her virtuous beauty is objectified in the laurel tree.

Even after the transformation, Apollo remains the desiring character in this way of telling the story. He wants to sexually possess Daphne even as a tree, but the form of the tree prevents that possibility:

Tree though she was, Apollo still loved her. Caressing the trunk
with his hand, he could feel the heart still fluttering under the new bark.

¹⁶ Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹⁷ John Ryan, “Towards Intimate Relations: Gesture and Contact Between Plants and People,” *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 9 (2012): 30.

¹⁸ This desire Marder terms “phytcentric,” his neologism for plant-centric. See Michael Marder, “For a Phytocentrism to Come,” *Environmental Philosophy*, Online First, May 2014.

¹⁹ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 39.

²⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 28.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

Seizing the branches, as though they were limbs, in his arms embrace,
he pressed his lips to the wood; but the wood still shrank from his kisses.²²

Now unable to rape Daphne, Apollo sublimates his desire by using the tree as a symbol of victory. Daphne is borne into symbolism by way of attempted rape and the laurel tree retains this significance today. There ends the tale.

In a description of Ovid's plot, using normative gender stereotypes and focusing on the human story, Daphne is clearly a symbol of chastity, the tree is symbol of victory and desire we identify with Apollo's masculine, sexual and unidirectional. The tricks of Cupid reveal the artifice of conventional storytelling by actively shaping the flow of desire with his arrows, a determined male in pursuit of reluctant female. Thus, in a reading governed by a conventional understanding of desire as human and masculine, Daphne does not have desire, the only desiring character is Apollo.

But Marder's understanding of plants as the most desiring beings of all provides access to another way of reading the flow of desire in this story, calling for attention to other parts of the plot and thus to opening up a new way of apprehending the meaning of the tale. Earlier in the story Daphne's desire to remain a virgin and to flee Apollo's advances is accompanied by a new love for plant life: "She joyed in the forest lairs and in the spoils of captive beasts ... Stubbornly single, she'd roam through the woodland thickets, without concern for the meaning of marriage or love or physical union."²³ Thinking about plants as desiring beings, reveals that Daphne does not lack desire, she just does not desire the sexual advances of Apollo. Cupid's arrow "repels" Apollo's but does not kill Daphne's desire for other living things. Rather the arrow can be seen as reorienting her desire, pointing it, so to speak, in another direction. In other words, the arrow makes the singular sexual desire of Apollo anathema to Daphne, and opens her up to a new way of being in the world. She no longer wants to be the object of someone else's desire; she now desires to live on her own terms, which is, in the first instance, as a human that does not want to be raped. After the metamorphosis, however, her desire to live on her own terms takes the form of a tree with multiple desires, for sunlight, water, air, minerals and nutrients and, in Marder's understanding of plant desire, this is not diminished desire, but rather desire made stronger and more extravagant. In this reading of the myth, guided by a new understanding of plant desire, the story is not about the hopeless flight of a damsel in distress into the illegible and immobile world of plants, but one of radical transformation into a new way of being in the world.

Plant Language (The Garden of Live Flowers)

When Alice stumbles upon a garden of live flowers, she exclaims her wish that they could talk:

'O Tiger-lily,' said Alice, addressing herself to one that was waving gracefully about in the wind, 'I wish you could talk!'

"We can talk," said the Tiger-lily: 'when there's anybody worth talking to.'

²² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, 29.

Alice was so astonished that she couldn't speak for a minute: it seemed to take her breath away. At length, as the Tiger-lily only went on waving about, she spoke again, in a timid voice—almost in a whisper. 'And can *all* the flowers talk?' 'As well as *you* can,' said the Tiger-lily. 'And a great deal louder'.²⁴

We might overlook Alice's wondrous encounter with the plants as the magical thinking of a child, or as what the world is like for an author on hallucinogens. Moreover, the problem with this representation of plant language is that it is entirely anthropomorphic. As such, the fantasy of plant communication limits the understanding of plant language to one of conventional human and Western linguistic signifiers. How can Marder's notion of plant language move us beyond this limited understanding of language?

Theorising the notion of plant language is an especially complex problem because plants are conventionally understood as mute or silent.²⁵ Many artists have used simple electrical circuits to amplify the hum of plant life, in order to make both audible and visible plant life as a form of music, gardens as connected circuits that can seamlessly interface with human technological systems and plants in dialogue with each other as they grow.²⁶ Furthermore, Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers have worked to debunk the idea of plants as mute by drawing on findings from plant neurobiology. They argue that "[p]lants have incredible capacities to *articulate difference*," but "this capacity to articulate worldly difference ... renders them *articulate* in the sense that they can express themselves and respond to their changing worlds by inventing new kinds of chemical propositions."²⁷ One example they offer is a study from the 1980s exploring how trees exude different kinds of chemical scents in response to insect predation.²⁸

For Marder, plant language is not invisible and inaudible, but an aspect of their visible presence in the world. He contends that "plants, like all living beings, articulate themselves spatially; in a body language," this, he insists, is not a metaphor. Rather, Marder continues, "the language of plants belongs to a hypermaterialist tradition that is alive to spatial relations

²⁴ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (Cosimo Inc: New York, 2010), 14.

²⁵ Alongside Marder, Eduardo Kohn has a different and more detailed theorisation of the semiotics of the more-than-human in Chapter One of *How Forests Think*, "The Open Whole." There is definitely scope for a sustained comparison between Kohn and Marder on this point, but that would be material for a more conventional review essay.

²⁶ Creative experiments aimed to make plant life audible have a long history. Douglas Kahn makes passing mention of the late Californian sound artist Tom Zahuranec who constructed special bio-sensing electronic devices to attach to plants in order to hear the noise produced by the plant's energy currents. See *Earth Sound, Earth Signal: Energies and Earth Magnitude in the Arts* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2013), 240. A recording of Zahuranec's 1972 performance with the plants is available at *Data Garden* (<http://datagarden.org/tag/tom-zahuranec/>). Since these early audio experiments, sonic plant art, often in the form of interactive installation, has developed globally. See, for example, Australian duo Creo Nova's interactive plant installation, "The Genesis of Biosynthia," <http://creonova.org/post/23785492957/genesis-of-biosynthia> and Danish Artist Sebastian Frisch's "Biophonic Garden," http://freshmania.de/biophonic_garden.html.

²⁷ Hustak and Myers, "Involuntary Momentum," 104.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 101.

and articulations between beings, animate or inanimate.”²⁹ Assuming these modes of signification—the inaudible hum, the chemical waft or the body in space—are a form of language, how might we work with the language of plants? Rather than tracing these forms of expression in human language and risk speaking for, or writing about plants, how might we let plants shape human language instead? How can we write collaboratively with plants?

“Learning from plants” Marder argues, “is in the first instance unlearning an objectifying approach to the world.”³⁰ To properly respond to the language of plants and to understand plants as agents in the production of meaning, therefore implies that our understanding and use of language will change. It will need to celebrate, be open to and respond to plants’ modes of communication. In other words, we cannot wait for the flowers to speak back in familiar ways, as they do to Alice, but rather humans need to labour to recognise other forms of communication, on the one hand, and work to communicate differently, on the other.

On the latter point, poets can lead the response to plant language from the perspective of changing written and spoken word; poets can teach us how to write with plants. Perhaps unsurprisingly Marder also turns to poetry to illustrate examples of plant language. This is unsurprising because poetry is an ostensibly human technology where the conventions of language are twisted, broken and remade by a desire to express something that language in its conventional forms cannot; the precise activity that acclaimed Australian eco-poet Peter Minter describes in *Morning, Hyphen*: “What better thing for poets to do right now than to begin in one language and end up in others.”³¹ It is not only poets who can likely best describe how plants are in the world, but poets can lead us into a new dialogue with plants because their life’s labour is to hack the structure of language itself.

Lewis Carroll’s vignette can also be seen to challenge conventional modes of communication, if it is interpreted in another way. When Alice encounters the talking Tiger-lily she does not immediately know how to respond. “Alice was so astonished that she couldn’t speak for a minute.”³² The shock of this new knowledge about plants’ capacity to speak renders her mute. Alice, humbled by the shock has to rethink how she deploys language as speech in order to account for this surprising encounter. When she speaks again her attitude is changed; she speaks “in a timid voice—almost in a whisper” in order to ask if all plants can talk. In contrast, Tiger-lily is not a timid character, but a confident being in the world with a command of language not only equivalent to Alice’s, but better; of course flowers can talk, she scoffs, and “a great deal louder”³³ than humans. Alice’s encounter with the plants, from the perspective of understanding plants as agents in the production of meaning, is, in light of this paper, not nonsense, but the start of a surprising conversation that has the capacity to reshape how we understand these complex beings and, in turn, can and should transform how we understand ourselves.

²⁹ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

³¹ Peter Minter, *Morning, Hyphen* (Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2000).

³² Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*, 14.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

The subtitle of this essay—"The Implications of a Phytocentric Interpretation of the Western Philosophical Tradition for the Environmental Humanities"—promises the delivery of a comprehensive survey of Marder's project for our varied interdisciplinary field. The degree to which my short essay does not live up to that promise is an index of the scale of the task of shifting the Western cultural hegemony towards non-anthropocentric and non-human exceptionalist modes of understanding. Instead what I delivered was a series of vignettes that highlight some of the enduring issues with anthropocentrism, but also how even non-ideal artworks, myths and stories can be reconceptualised through the critical lens offered in *Plant-thinking*.

Marder carefully cultivates ways of conceptualising how plants do things in the world, how they acquire nourishment, how they desire light and water and how they might be understood to have language. But Marder's project in *Plant-thinking* is largely negative; it is designed to undo the Western metaphysical tradition in order to revitalise the agency of plants for philosophy. Nevertheless, as this essay has demonstrated, there are ways to harness the deconstructive logic of *Plant-thinking* for a reconstructive project, to revisit the relationships between plants and all animals, but especially the relationship between plants and human animals. Indeed, as this essay has shown, his careful theorisation of plant nourishment, desire and language opens up new ways of understanding art, interpreting myths and writing about the world while recognising the presence of plants and understanding their roles as agents in the production of meaning.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS This paper was originally presented at the 2014 ASLEC-ANZ Conference at the ANU. I would like to thank Gabrielle de Vietri for her conviction in boycotting the 2014 Biennale of Sydney and for donating her creation to the Farm, the crew at the UNSW Environmental Humanities Saloon for their excellent feedback on an earlier draft and the very generous and useful comments from the three anonymous referees.

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