

Article

The Light of the Leaf: A Theological Critique of Timothy Morton's 'Dark Ecology'

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Abstract: The plant has recently emerged as a battleground of conflicting ecocriticisms. 'Dark Ecology' is, in the works of Timothy Morton, an ecocritical hermeneutic, in which the world can be subtracted into the parts of objects, of the plant, and of any leaf that exceeds the totality of abstract 'Nature'. In dividing the whole into the parts, and combining the parts into an imminently subtracted whole, he has recommended a negative dialectic of virtual objects that can be collected into a 'hyperobject'. This dialectic can, however, be argued to dissolve any whole into parts, and render the hyperobject internally fissured. We can, from the 'darkness' of this fissure, begin to read Nature according to the 'via plantare', that is, a mystical way of desiring an other as plant so as to know and love the visible light of the invisible God. 'Vegetal difference', the difference of the plant from the animal, should, I argue, be read for theology as a finite reflection of the divine difference of the Holy Trinity in a Trinitarian Ontology, in which the originary difference of the Son from the Father is related through the Holy Spirit, and given again in accelerating gratuity—like the light of the leaf that shines forth from any flower.

Keywords: Timothy Morton; Dark Ecology; hyperobject; botany; plant; via plantare; vegetal difference; Michael Marder; Goethe; Trinity; Trinitarian Ontology



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1. Vegetal Difference

The plant is stranger than we know.¹ It comes before animal life, both in the scale of evolution, and in the chain of nutrition. In coming before, it calls us to reflect upon the primordial origins of Life itself. Every leaf opens to receive the light, as each blossom explodes again in many colours. And it can be read in this light to carry the trace of a wilder path that leads to the summit of mystical theology.

The life of the plant unfolds from seed to stem, and from branch to leaf, in an unre-served exteriority of sensations, which ever open to receive the fullness of light, and grow in longing towards the Sun (Gagliano 2017; Marder 2013). The difference of the plant from the animal is thus not simply that of a vertical difference from absence to presence, but rather a lateral difference of diverse assemblages that unfolds in every direction, even as it can again be collected to grow into a blossom and give its fruit for an other, for the life of the animal, and for the cognition of the human.

However, since the earliest studies of botany, the plant has been repeatedly distinguished in the 'scale of nature' (*scala naturae*) by a subaltern negation of the 'higher' powers of animal locomotion and human reason (Hardy and Totelin 2016, pp. 1–32; Arber 1950, pp. 1–8). It has thus been rendered as the abject other, planted beneath the feet of animal life, at a subaltern remove from human reason. Yet, in this pivotal ambiguity, the plant has also threatened to topple the scale to which it had once been subordinated. For if it were utterly bereft of intelligibility, the plant could never be understood by human reason. Nothing could then be known by us of the plant in itself. And the plant could never be classified by such a denial of these higher powers correlated to the human.

Rather, the plant is as wild as it is mysterious. It feels before it thinks and can be thought. Its difference has recently been argued by Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze

to escape from any sublation of difference under the identity of anthropocentric reason (Heidegger 1995, pp. 62, 91, 177–70, 191–93; Derrida 1989, p. 79; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 3–25, 269 fn. 52, 505–6). Yet, in this escape, it also founds a new opposition, and engenders a further conflict. (Glottfelty and Fromm 1996, pp. xviii–xxxi) The plant can, at this *aporia*, be read as a pivotal site of conflicting ecocriticisms, whether in ‘Dark Ecology’, in which the whole of nature is subtracted into the parts of objects, or in a Christian ecology of light, in which every leaf shimmers with a glimmer of the glory of God.

Before the first division from the animal, the plant had already drawn from its roots the spark of that light that moves the stars. The ancient Pythagoreans had cast the plant in a chain of counting geometrical compositions proceeding from the visible light of the invisible heavenly ‘hearth’ (Zhmud 2012, pp. 380–6). Plato had then elevated the intelligible specie or ideas (*eide*) of the plant above all appearances (Plato 1987, cf. *Timaeus*, 77a–c, 90a–d). And the specific differentiae of fungi, rocks, and, indeed, of any other form of life could thereafter be rendered by ancient and modern Platonists alike as but a virtual node of an arboreal logic descending from one unified genera into many diverse and intelligible specie.

Among the Church Fathers, the plant had accordingly been read as a visible expression of the ‘seed of reason’ (*logoi spermatikoi*), which was created by the originary creative speech of the divine *Logos* before it came to be generated in any corporeal species (Basil of Caesarea 1996, pp. 76–79, 94–95; Louth 2001, pp. 13–16). For Origen, the Tree of Life (*Zoe*) appears in the spiritual garden of Eden as an angelic apparition of an attribute (*epinoia*) of the Son in God as Trinity (Origen of Alexandria 2017, 1.2.4., p. 45; Heine 2005). For Basil, the *logoi spermatikoi* of the plant is created by Christ the *Logos* on the ‘third day’ before the Sun and Moon on the ‘fourth day’ of creation (Basil of Caesarea 1996, pp. 76–79, 94–95). And for Augustine, the consumption of the deathly fruit of the Tree of Knowledge proleptically anticipates the reverse consumption of the saving fruit of the ‘Tree of Jesse’ (Augustine of Hippo 1991, pp. 66–68, 83–88, 107–9, 131–32, 137–38).

However, since Aristotle’s *De Anima* and Theophrastus’ *Enquiry into Plants*, the plant has also been repeatedly cast by Peripatetic botany in the subordinate role of an abject ‘other’ to the animal, as to the human (Aristotle 1991, cf. *De Anima*, 410b–411b, 413a–414a, 432a–432b; Theophrastus 1916, pp. 1–23). The word ‘plant’ (*plantare*) designates this subordinate position of that which is ‘planted’ beneath the animal, and below the human (Marder 2011b, p. 470). The ‘vegetative soul’ of the plant has thus come to be defined by a sheer deficiency of animal ‘locomotion’ and human ‘reason’. And the plant, along with all prior life, has since been doubly cast beneath the feet of animal life and human intelligence.

Studies in botany have thus tended to reflect the privileged forms of human understanding. Yet, since Immanuel Kant’s transcendental critiques of the logic of modern natural science, the role of the plant has also come to be reconsidered in Romantic *Naturphilosophie* (Kant 2004). In a crucial departure from classical botany, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had first described a hidden relationship between the visible exterior and the invisible interior of plant morphology, where, he writes, the “ever-moving light” “first bursts into light” from its infancy as it is repeated in an “infinite variety” of forms, where “each leaf elaborates” upon the last, adding from the former to the latter, in a virtual recollection of the entire previous arc of its expansion and contraction, from the inchoate potentiality of the seed to the polarization and mixing of opposites among the fruit (Goethe 2009, p. 2; Haecker 2020). The plant has thus come to be read in a conspicuously theological register, saturated with traces of revelation, even as it stands radically open to creative new interpretations.

‘Critical Plant Studies’ has recently attempted to ask this question again, of the life, of the power, and implicitly also of the divinity of the plant (Nealon 2016, pp. 37–38; Woodward and Lemmer 2019, pp. 23–27; see also the *Critical Plant Studies* book series, esp. Laist 2013). Following Heidegger and Derrida, it has raised the more originary questions of the polar oppositions of the *scala naturae* (Heidegger 1995, pp. 62, 91, 177–70, 191–93; Derrida 1989, p. 79). It has taken its founding inspiration from the Neo-Marxist ‘critical

theory' of Horkheimer, Adorno, and the Frankfurt School (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Adorno 1973; Horkheimer 1972, 1987; Geuss 1981). It has, following 'Critical Animal Studies', extended their 'ideology critique' from the standpoint of the animal to the plant (Best et al. 2007, pp. 4–5; Twine 2010; McCance 2013; Nealon 2016; Laist 2013; Woodward and Lemmer 2019, pp. 23–27). And, in response to the privileging of the animal, it has momentarily reappraised the revolutionary potential of the plant as a pivotal site of resistance to biopolitical domination, where plants can play the role of the 'abject other', subordinated to, and yet ever struggling to be emancipated from the animal.

The figure of the plant can now be argued to have raised a fundamental challenge to first philosophy, or metaphysics. Michael Marder has argued that the *scala natura* has not only marginalized plants, but cast them in the crucial role of the transvaluation of all metaphysical value systems (Marder 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2021). He has rendered 'vegetal difference', the difference of the plant from the animal, as an originary supplement that threatens to subvert the metaphysical foundations of the *scala naturae* (Marder 2011b, p. 469). For, as he describes, the plant is rooted outside of itself, in an external element upon which it depends (Marder 2011b, p. 476). In the absence of a central nervous system, it appears bereft of internal relations, except as its external members radiate outward to another, and inward from the seed at its source. The leaf thus appears to be infinitely iterable, as a building block of the tree, from which it may always fall away (Marder 2011b, p. 485). It can thus be rendered as a symbol of a contingent supplementarity, which exceeds any essential relation to a higher genus, and to the *scala naturae* that is held under an anthropocentric gaze (Marder 2011b, p. 483). 'Vegetal difference' can, accordingly, be cast as more original than the specific difference of the *scala naturae*. And in its lateral excess, this difference may also point towards the subversion, not only of the unity of nature, but also and essentially to the unity of metaphysics (Marder 2011b, p. 481). "Plants", he says, "are the weeds of metaphysics", quietly subverting so as to ultimately "outlive metaphysics" (Marder 2011b, p. 487).

Nowhere has this vegetal subversion been more sharply distinguished than in the ecological writings of Timothy Morton. He has, in a series of influential works, developed a new ecocritical hermeneutic (Morton 2007, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2016, 2017, 2018; Morton and Boyer 2021). In contrast to Platonic philosophy, Christian theology, and Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, Morton's 'Dark Ecology' is designed to perform an 'ontological subtraction' of any unified whole of 'Nature' into a chaotic assemblage of objects for the purpose of emancipating the plant as a figure of ecology for a radical new politics of environmental practice (Morton 2007, pp. 12, 19; Morton and Boyer 2021, pp. 61–71; cf. Badiou 2007, pp. 23–30; 2008, pp. 13–14, 24, 114, 121, 127–78, 250–51; 2012, pp. 269–71). The abstract totality of nature that had once been held behind the plant can thereafter fall to pieces in an anarchic cornucopia of its sheer unreserved exteriority. In subtracting the whole into the parts, he has recommended a negative dialectic to divide, dissolve, and serially reconstitute the 'hyperobject' as an imminently subtracted and sublime aggregate of objects. Yet as I shall argue, this negative dialectic can also be critically subverted by accelerating its negativity to dissolve the virtual ground of the hyperobject and destroy the dark 'gods' of Dark Ecology. The virtual realm of a-relational objects is thus destined to fall away, until at last there remains no unified whole of nature that stands behind even as it shines forth in the light of every leaf (Morton 2007, pp. 1–28; 2013a, p. 21; 2016, pp. 159, 161).

Dark Ecology can, nevertheless, be celebrated for having once and for all emancipated the 'vegetal difference' of the plant from abject subordination to human understanding. For, in contrast to the subaltern relation of the plant to the animal, its difference is not prior to but rather produced in and by the plant, as the plant opens to receive an other and respond in giving of itself for another. Its difference is, accordingly, not simply a vertical difference from absence to presence, but rather and more richly the lateral difference of a gift, a gift that is offered in the sacrifice of itself, and a gift that can be plastically folded over the contours of each and every plant (Marder 2011b, pp. 484–87).

The plant can, in this way, be read as an icon of ‘postmodern difference’. Although once rooted in the unity of Nature, as in the simplicity of God, the form of difference has, since Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze, been transcribed by Marder and Morton across the virtual folds of objects, organisms, and plants (Heidegger 1995, pp. 62, 91, 177–70, 191–93; Derrida 1989, p. 79; Deleuze and Guattari 1987, pp. 3–25, 269 fn. 52, 505–6). The leaf of the plant thus appears to show the face of all objects in excess of the whole. And the plant ever silently protests against its consumption by the animal, as also against its cognition by the human. Yet, as the site of a vegetal rendition of negative or apophatic theology, the plant can also be read to discover what, I suggest, we can call the ‘via *plantare*’, that is, a way of desiring as plant to know and love the absolute object of Nature, as of God.

The difference of the plant can, as I will show, be read with this via *plantare* as a vestigial reflection of the divine difference of the Holy Trinity, in which the first difference of the Son from the Father is instantly related in and through the Holy Spirit, such that, in their mutual otherness, the essential relations of God as Trinity can be cut across, and given from, so as to shine from within the hidden folds of every leaf. Vegetal difference can thus be shown to reflect the divine difference of the Trinity, the kenotic emptying of Christ in creation, and the entire sacrificial economy of the Church that is consummately performed in the Eucharist. The plant can, in this way, be read for a Christian ecotheology, to shimmer with a wilder reflection of a ‘Trinitarian Ontology’, where ‘heliotropism’ is a vegetal expression of ‘*henosis*’, all leaves turn their faces in silent adoration to the visible light of invisible divinity, and the glory of God radiates like the light of the leaf exploding from every flower. (Hemmerle 2020).

2. Dark Ecology

Timothy Morton’s ‘Dark Ecology’ has broken decisively from the tradition of Christian ecotheology. “The whole”, he writes, “is always weirdly less than the sum of its parts.” (Morton 2016, p. 13) And the whole of Nature, as the whole of the world, is regarded as less real because it is less rational than its parts. He describes, in *Ecology Without Nature*, how the idea of Nature “will have to wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society”, as it is “getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art”, where “the fantasies we have about nature take shape—and dissolve.” (Morton 2007, p. 1) “Art forms have, Morton suggests, “something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality” in a “collective practice of creating an environment” (Morton 2010, p. 8; 2007, p. 24).

Art can thus be studied as a crucial medium for ecological criticism. It “is ecological insofar as it is made from materials and exists in the world”, in which “ecology permeates all forms” of material culture, and ecological thought is itself an “ecological event” that shapes the world (Morton 2010, pp. 8, 11). Yet, once it is subtracted into a multiplicity of parts, art acknowledges no singular mediator, from whom the world may be absolutely related in all of its members. Rather, it rejects any mediating third for a series of ‘hyper-objects’, which are fixed upon the poles of a false binary, of nature and humanity, where Nature appears as but an ideological projection of an abstract totality correlated to the human subject (Morton 2007, p. 23; 2013a, pp. 1–24).

Morton advertises Dark Ecology as “a theory of ecological criticism”, in which ecology escapes from the Romantic idea of Nature (Morton 2007, p. 9). Its critique is directed, not for the purpose of “shutting down ecocriticism, but [rather] of opening it up” again, as an “ecological reading practice.” (Morton 2007, p. 9, 14; 2010, pp. 8–11) He indicts Romantic ecology for restricting the “radical openness” of ecological thought within the “pre-packaged conceptual container” of a totalizing idea of ‘Nature’ (Morton 2010, p. 11). He exhorts us to a “thinking bigger than totality itself.” (Morton 2010, p. 5) And he recommends “a truly ecological reading practice”, one that “would think the environment beyond rigid conceptual categories”, and one that “would include as much as possible of the radical openness of the ecological thought” (Morton 2010, p. 11).

Ecology is, as he formulates, “living minus Nature, plus consciousness” (Morton 2010, p. 19). ‘Living minus nature’ indicates the release of life from the subtraction of Nature, for the emancipation of a new consciousness, and a new ecocriticism. The idea of ‘Nature’, like the idea of God, will, he predicts, ultimately “wither away in an ‘ecological’ state of human society” (Morton 2007, p. 1). He thus suspends the essential unity of Nature as a spurious ideological artefact of left environmentalism and liberal capitalism, which marks the moment when the condition of “capitalism that now covers the earth began to take effect”, producing “paradoxes facing environmentalism”, and threatening to subvert its revolutionary potential (Morton 2007, pp. 4, 13).

For this purpose, Morton proposes a radical deconstruction of ‘ecologocentrism’. He argues that “just as Derrida explains how differance at once underlies and undermines logocentrism”, “the rhetorical strategies of nature writing undermine what one could call ecologocentrism” (Morton 2007, p. 6). ‘Nature’ is, contrary to Goethe, Schelling, and Hegel, not the invisible ‘Spirit’ of a hidden yet essential unity, but rather only “an empty placeholder for a host of other concepts” (Morton 2007, p. 14; cf. see Goethe 2009, pp. 5–102; Schelling 1988, pp. 30–35, 73–74, 88–89, 128–36, 276–83; 2004, pp. 36–60, 121–32, 146–49, 155–56, 166–67; Hegel 1970, scts. 343–49, pp. 45–101). It “flickers between things” as it is “both/and” or “neither/nor”, the difference between the differentia, in an infinite differentiation, which may be ambivalently both affirmed and denied by the deferred signification of every part of a lost whole (Morton 2007, p. 18).

Nature is, for Morton, not written, but rather ‘un-written’, in an ‘unwriting’ that subverts the stable meaning of the writing of nature under the ideological fixations of romantic art and literature (Morton 2007, p. 19). ‘Unwriting’ is, following Derrida, a way of writing under and against this totalizing presence of Nature (Derrida 1997, pp. 6–26). Morton’s ecocritique of ecologocentrism can, accordingly, be un-written as a Derridean ‘hauntology’, a reflection upon the deferred presence of ‘nature’ that continues to haunt the world, with which to exercise the ghost of Nature, as of the Spirit of God (Morton 2007, p. 14; cf. Derrida 1994). And the idea of Nature can at last be cast out as “an ideological phantasmagoria”, of “nature as fantasy”, to exorcise the spectre of God from the spurious totalization of objects (Morton 2007, p. 14).

‘Dark Ecology’ is thus defined by this “new ecological aesthetics” (Morton 2010, p. 16; 2016, pp. 5–13). It can, in contrast to Christian and Romantic ecotheology, be called ‘dark’ as any whole is subtracted into its parts, and these parts float above the “first darkness” of the negative void between objects (Morton 2016, p. 5). It is framed within this alterior void between objects, an effort of thinking the void, and of the ‘nothing’ that is held above and beyond all thought and being (Morton 2016, p. 10). And in a later departure from Derrida, Morton has come to endorse Graham Harman’s ‘Object-Oriented-Ontology’ (OOO), in which the epistemological correlation of the object to the subject is ‘withdrawn’ from the standpoint of the subject into the separate ground of the object (Morton 2013b, pp. 16–30; 2011, pp. 163–90; cf. Harman 2002, 2018).

With this release of objects beyond the nomological restraints of logic and nature, Morton recommends a ‘realist magic’ characterized by an “aesthetic-causal nonlocality”, in which causality is distantly mediated by “nonphysical realms of existence” (Morton 2013b, pp. 17, 20). Unlike the Newtonian conception of the world, realist magic is “not mechanical or linear” (Morton 2013b, p. 17). Rather, it is as “mysterious” as it is “withdrawn” in an “unspeakable” assemblage of radically contingent aesthetic objects (Morton 2013b, pp. 16–17). The events of art can thus be characterized as ‘magic’, as each can set in motion hidden causal chains of “demonic force, carrying information from the beyond” (Morton 2013b, pp. 20–24). “Causality must”, he writes, “reside somewhere in the realm of relations between objects”, from which it can freely cause events across a nomologically anarchic assemblage of objects (Morton 2013b, p. 29).

‘Nature’ appears, for Morton, as only the last totalizing aggregate that is dispersed and deferred in an infinite “metonymic list” (Morton 2007, p. 14). It is dispersed as atomic parts of an absent whole, dissolving its parts, in a repetition of its dialectical subversion and

subtraction. The hyperobject is constructed across a plane of radical immanence, where, at last, there is no outside, no dualism, no transcendence, that is not already contained as an aggregate of objects (Morton 2013b, p. 29). Its aesthetic sublimity consists precisely in this infinite gap between the parts and the whole, in which such an aggregate of infinitely many parts appears as a negative infinity, which, *qua* quantity, is equally finitized, and as such, set in opposition to the infinite, in a serial inscription of this sublime and infinite gap beyond the finite (Morton 2007, p. 16).

'Dark Ecology' thus stands radically opposed to Christian ecotheology. For, in contrast to Christian theology, in which God creates the world, communicates the divine 'Light' of the creative *Logos*, and reflects the image of God in every act of creation, Dark Ecology subtracts the totality of Nature into a diverse assemblage of parts dispersed as objects, and repeats the *agon* of its recycling opposition, as it collapses into the dark and empty abyss between atomic and unrelated objects. Such a subtraction of the whole into parts is equally a subtraction of the 'world', of the 'world soul', and of creation in the 'image of God' (Gen. 1:26–28, 5:1–3, 9:6; Plato, *Timaeus*, 34b3–c5). The negative dialectic of Dark Ecology can, accordingly, be regarded as a mode of 'ontological subtraction', in which, as in Alain Badiou, the one is subtracted into the multiple that is not one, and not being, but 'less than nothing' suspended before the void (Badiou 2007, pp. 23–30; 2008, pp. 13–14, 24, 114, 121, 127–28, 250–51).

However, ecocriticism is, for precisely this reason, always a tacitly theological enterprise. For in its criticism of nature, of the world, and of creation as a reflection of its creator, it recommends a more radical mode of 'negative theology'. As in Derrida, its "deconstruction goes beyond just saying that something exists", in "a relentless questioning of essence", as ultimately of the 'hyperessential' unity of God (Morton 2007, p. 21). Rather, it reads and writes "in between the polarized terms such as God and matter." (Morton 2007, p. 15) It writes, between these poles, of its 'darkness', rendered from subtraction, and drawn from among the multitude of all dispersed relations. It shares in the 'darkness' of negative theology. For the infinite negativity of objects must be dialectically annulled as but a virtual alterity before the unsurpassable nova of creation. It is written under a false apophaticism, in which, contrary to Pseudo-Dionysius, the infinite negativity of judgment is not annulled and yet related via *analogia*, but only repeated in the intensified ramifications of so many virtual objects (Morton 2007, p. 21; cf. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1987, pp. 133–42).

A 'hyperobject' is a sublime aggregate of objects that exceeds the domain of all other objects (Morton 2013a, pp. 1–24). It is defined by Morton as "a bundle of entities massively distributed in time and space that forms an entity in its own right, one that is impossible for humans to see or touch directly." (Morton 2017, p. 45) Hyperobjects ostensibly appear to transcend the domain of finite objects. As in the city of Houston, Texas, they are ultimately "too massive and multiphasic in their distribution in time and space for humans to fully comprehend or experience them in a unitary way", occupying a "higher-dimensional phase space." (Morton 2013a, p. 14) And as in the Gnostic emanation of hypostases, hyperobjects appear to transcend the domain of subjectively correlatable objects, even as they stand upon a higher ontological ground.

Since, however, Morton's negative dialectic subtracts the whole of any hyperobject into the parts of objects, and any one object to another is mediated by a whole, the hyperobject must subtract all relations, all compositions, and all qualities into an infinite quantitative plurality, where, at last, even the possibility of counting is abolished, and nothing at all can be counted to be known at all.

Since, furthermore, the subject is only one among many diverse objects, this abolition of knowledge by the subject into evermore distant, transcendent, and alienated hyperobjects ultimately results in the evacuation of subjectivity into objectivity. Once, therefore, any fixed and abiding distinction between the subject and the object has passed away into the void anterior to both thought and being, Morton's hyper-objects can equally be regarded

as ‘hyper-subjects’, in a higher or ‘hyper-correlation’ of the subject to the object, radically immanent to thought, and phenomenally manifest as a whole.

The hyperobject can thus be heralded to be “directly responsible” for the “end of the world.” (Morton 2013a, p. 2.) Morton writes: “Clearly, planet Earth has not exploded. But the concept world is no longer operational, and hyperobjects are what brought about its demise.” (Morton 2013a, p. 6) For since, as in Markus Gabriel, the world is subtracted into a field of senses, objects, and things, its final ‘end’ is nothing but such a subtraction of the whole into the parts of objects, from which it can ever again be reconstituted in a succession of hyperobjects (Gabriel 2015, pp. 73–81).

The ‘Apocalypse’ can, for Morton, be dated not to the future but to the past. It can, as he observes, be observed to begin as early as the ‘Great Acceleration’ with the invention of the steam engine at the advent of the Industrial Revolution (Morton 2007, p. 12; 2013a, pp. 7–10). It appears in this rendition to overwrite the Christian apocalyptic narrative of the ‘death of God’ on the Cross, of salvation fulfilled but yet to come, and any hope of the *Apocatastasis* as it is deferred to the *Parousia* (Mt. 24:34–37, Acts 3:19–21; cf. O’Regan 2009). And contrary to Bruno Latour, it marks the beginning of modern industrial economies, of the climate crisis, and of the age of the ‘Anthropocene’ (Morton 2013a, p. 9; cf. Latour 1993).

The ‘hypersubject’ can then be contrasted with a ‘hyposubject’: the ‘hypersubject’ is the “command and control” agent of the hyperobject; while the hyposubject is the abject subject, held under the domination of the hypersubject and the hyperobject (Morton 2013a, p. 14). The ‘hyposubjects’ are “the native species of the Anthropocene.” (Morton 2013a, p. 14) They can be regarded as the agent of an “anti-race towards an aesthetic state” of “ecological awareness”, an aesthetic of eco-thought, one “based on a meditative aesthetic state”, and one which, with Michel Serres, may also recommend an “appreciative listening” that may be expected to replace “mastery and possession” (Morton 2007, p. 12; cf. Serres 1998, p. 34).

Ecocritique can, Morton suggests, ‘decelerate’ the ‘Great Acceleration’ of ideology under capitalism by “subtracting things.” (Morton 2007, p. 12) In slowing down, the hyposubject withdraws from the accelerating correlation of the subject in and for the object, the plurality of objects, and the hyperobject. This ‘withdraw’ from correlation then results in an objectification of relations, the rendering of relations as virtual objects, and the release of an infinite regress of relations, as well as an equally infinite proliferation of objects without relations (Bradley [1893] 1916, pp. 19–34). Morton’s ‘Object Oriented Ecology’ (OOE), could thus promise to inaugurate an even more excessively objectified ‘nominalism’ across the virtual plateaus of radical immanence, where intrinsic relationality is emptied into atomic objects, and objects are evacuated of all relations (Morton 2013a, p. 20).

With this promise, Morton ironically gestures to the apotheosis of the hyperobjects. He casts the hyperobject as the “last god” and “saving power” of an ecocritical politics, which, similar to ‘arche-lithic’ faeries, operates the ontological engines of ecological ‘attunement’ (Morton 2013a, p. 21; 2016, pp. 159, 161). Attunement’ is, he defines, a secret or ‘gnostic’ synchronization, a “loose connectivity of the symbiotic real”, and a way of “solidarity” with the ‘nonhuman’ (Morton 2007, p. 12; 2017, p. 12).

‘Ecognosis’ then promises a new gnostic knowledge of “the very structure of thought and logic” (Morton 2016, p. 159). Following Graham Priest, Morton acknowledges “that contradictory beings exist”, and “violations of LNC [the Law of Non-Contradiction] such as the Liar paradox (“this statement is false”) exist as archaeological evidence of something in the ontological realms”, awaiting to be discovered among the traces of ‘aesthetic causality’ that erupts from the nomological constraints of formal consistency (Morton 2013b, p. 29; cf. Priest 2002, pp. 287–393; 2006).

Once, however, all such relations have been subtracted, the inferential relations of logic can be imminently fissured, rendered non-necessary, and deactivated in the analytical validation of logical consequence. The deep structures of thought and being are shaped entirely by such an ‘ecognosis’ of demonic hyperobjects beyond human understanding.

And in the age of the Anthropocene, these ‘hyposubjects’ are “only just now beginning to discover what they may be and become” (Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 15).

‘Dark Ecology’ can thus be characterized as a ‘Dark Theology’ (Morton 2013a, p. 21; Morton and Boyer 2021, p. 74). For, as the foregoing has shown, Morton’s negative dialectic of the whole of nature into the parts of objects can be serially reconstituted as a hyperobject, and equally of a hypersubject, in which the object is correlated to the subject, to subtract the transcendent ground of any higher theological correlation, or ‘hyper-correlation’, of subjectivity to objectivity, and, ultimately, to annul the essential relations of God as Trinity (Meillasoux 2008, pp. 38–39; cf. Hegel 2010, pp. 735–53).

This ontological subtraction of the whole into the parts as objects floating before the void initially authorizes the reconstitution of all objects in and from the transcendent ground of hyperobjects. Its objects appear “withdrawn, unspeakable”, and “mysterious” (Morton 2013b, p. 18). Yet, this subtraction of the whole into atomic objects without relations also renders the hyperobject as an internally fissured and imminently subtracted whole, which can release all objects into a nihilistic abyss where, at last, everything is possible because nothing is actual, necessary, and knowable at all (Meillasoux 2008, pp. 5–21; Harman 2002, pp. 16–35).

The hyperobject thereafter appears as little more than a vanishing shibboleth that subverts the virtual ground of its own objects and relations. Yet, as soon as all such relations have been reduced to atomic objects, it can rupture all relations, objects, and thought, as this rupture is repeated across all possible composition, framed in a plane of radical immanence, and yet forever at a loss for any genuine taste for transcendence.

3. The ‘via Plantare’

Dark Ecology has thus come to essentially conflict with a Christian ecotheology of light. For, as the foregoing has shown, the signs of the plant can, in Dark Ecology, no longer be read in a hermeneutic circle that cycles in and from the divine *Logos*, through the seeds of reason (*logoi spermatikoi*), to the manifest appearances of Nature (Origen of Alexandria 1953, pp. 281, 379–80; 1989, pp. 56–57; 2017, pp. 87–89, 171–75). It has rather subtracted life into an empty void between atomic objects, and reconstituted its parts in a sublime aggregate of internally fissured hyperobjects (Morton 2013a, pp. 5–7; 2017, pp. 22, 48–56). At the nadir of its utmost subtraction, there remains no Platonic ‘world-soul’, no Romantic *hen kai pan* of invisible spirit of visible nature, and no divine ‘Life’ of an absolute mediator that gives of itself to shine forth in the revelatory media of every leaf (Morton 2007, p. 2). The essence of Life, of the plant, and of the leaf, can then no longer be discovered from within the descending scale of natural organisms. Rather, Nature has been subverted at its roots. And once it has turned its face away from its originary source, the plant may begin to wither without its roots as so many leaves left to drift upon an open sea.

Dark Ecology can, nevertheless, be observed to carry the wayward trace of a ‘negative’ or apophatic theology. For, as the foregoing has shown, it is founded as a negative dialectic on the subtraction of the whole into the parts, the polar opposition of the plant to the animal, and the release of its excessive particularity over and against the ground of its originary source. The plant can, at this point, be momentarily released from its founding role as the subaltern ‘other’ in the *scala naturae*. Yet, with this subtraction of all relations, its difference too can be annulled, as neither like nor unlike, but equally both at once. It thereafter exhibits an infinite negativity of opposite parts held together by an imminently subtracted and sublime object of increasingly remote and inaccessible contemplation.

Dark Ecology can, at this point, be critiqued for denying knowledge of its absolute object, of Nature, as of God. For, in its negative dialectic, its divisions are not carried to any productive consequence, but, as in Gorgias, are rather held in a series of oscillating binary dichotomies, which, in destroying both poles, infinitely repeat the *agon* of its endless opposition (See Gorgias’ “On the Nonexistent” in Pseudo-Aristotle 2004, pp. 206–9; and Sextus Empiricus 2005, pp. 15–19; cf. Kerferd 1981, p. 93; Wardy 1996, pp. 21–24). After logic is suspended, it appears to be fissured by the dissolution of all relations, compositions,

and relations of logical inference. And absent of all relations, a spurious objectivity can then be dialectically reversed into an equally spurious subjectivity, in which a spectral realm of a-relational objects is released to haunt a virtually disembodied subject, until, at last, the realms of the subject and the object merge as one, and the unified totality of 'Nature' can be virtually reconstituted in an internally fissured and imminently dissolving hyperobject (Lemke 2017).

This conflict between Dark and Light ecological theologies can thus be observed to recapitulate an ancient conflict between Dark and Light mystical theologies. (Louth 2007, pp. 32, 57, 70–72, 79–97) Following the ancient Gnostics, Dark Ecology has accelerated the negative dialectic of deconstruction, plunged into the 'darkness' of not knowing, and reconstituted its diverse relations among objects as the virtual ground of the hyperobject. (Jonas 1958) The divine 'Light' of absolute self-knowledge can then be communicated and reflected in a dialectical ascent from unknowing to knowing, in which, however, knowledge may only be momentarily satisfied in knowing that which ultimately remains absolutely unknown. The flickering lights of understanding may, as in Morton's private disco, only elicit a desire that again vanishes into the depth of night (Morton 2016, pp. 68–69).

From this outermost night, we may, nevertheless, discover a hidden way to knowledge that feels before it thinks. The 'way of the plant' (via *plantare*) is, I suggest, an alternative way of experiencing and desiring the world as plant. As in the 'negative way' (via *negativa*) of mystical theology, the via *plantare* designates a path of successive negative judgments, in which we may, in imitation of the plant, perform a negative judgment of not knowing in coming to know of the absolute object, of Nature, as of God (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 1987, pp. 133–42). For the plant ever opens to receive the light and respond in blooming again in many colours. And at the acme of its growth, it bursts into a flower, produces a fruit, and gives of itself entirely for the nutrition of all future life (Goethe 2009, pp. 56–102; cf. Haecker 2020).

The plant can thus be regarded as a tragic figure. It stands open to receive in light the knowledge of its absolute object. Yet it can only stand open to receive another as it first abolishes its own otherness. For it desires to overcome the otherness of its dispersed particularity, to be withdrawn into the originary and universal source that gives it life, and yet also to be united to that which finally destroys it, even as it gives it again in the cycle of birth, fructification, and death. And in producing its fruit, the flower at once shows the most unreserved gift of itself for another, such that, in a symbolic inversion of Heidegger's 'being-towards-death', its death is also and at once the seed of new life (Heidegger 2001, scts. 46–53, pp. 279–311). The purposes of the plant are thus fulfilled in sacrifice.

The death of Christ on the 'tree' of the Cross can accordingly be read as the consummate sacrifice, not only of the human, but also and of the plant (Acts. 5:30). For, in contrast to Dark Ecology, Christian ecotheology attributes the Life (*Zoe*) of the plant to Christ before the creation of the world of invisible spirits and visible Nature (Origen of Alexandria 2017, p. 45). It is then received and given in the othering of its own otherness, neither as other nor as the same, but, rather, in the suspension of this very otherness. It thereafter appears in the reflection of the other in and for an other to laterally escape from any sublation under the identity of anthropocentric reason. Yet, in giving of itself entirely for another, it also destroys its radical alterity, except as it can be given again from a more originary source. Plants are, we may say, essentially 'heliotropic', always turning in body as in spirit towards the other, the source of life in the Sun, as ultimately to the visible light of the invisible God.

The via *plantare* thus leads along a wilder path to a recapitulation of the first principles of systematic theology. The first created difference of creation from its creator proceeds from the ground and reflects the first divine difference of the Son from the Father as many made one in God as Trinity. The generative relation of the plant to the Sun then reflects as in a 'mirror darkly' the originary filial relation of the Son to the Father (1 Cor. 13:12). In receiving this light that radiates again in every blossom, the plant doubly anticipates its own sublation, first to the nutrition of the animal, and finally to the cognition of the human, for whom the plant appears as the nearest living neighbour of animal life.

At the summit of mystical theology, God can be not only known but felt by a spiritual practice that shares in a feeling of the world as plant. For in the practice of sharing in its sensory imaginary, we may, as Simone Weil suggests, discover a plant-like sensation of turning our whole body, and our entire spirit, towards the invisible light, knowledge, and love of God (Weil 1988, p. 174; De Lussy 2016, 337–49; Kotva 2020, p. 156–99). The via *plantare* is thus as much a spiritual practice as it is a spiritual hermeneutic—a way of feeling to discover the divine or ‘spiritual sense’ of theology (Williams 2007, pp. 80–83; Pickstock 2020, pp. 113–117).

‘Vegetal difference’, the difference of the plant from the animal can thus be read for theology as a vestigial reflection of the divine difference of the Holy Trinity. For in this heliotropic turning of its body and its spirit towards its absolute object, the essential difference of the plant stands in an intrinsic relation to another, in a finite imitation of the self-othering of the Son from the Father, of the *Logos* from the Son, and of the divine Life which is given again in and by the plant.

The plant can thus preserve its dignity in its difference. Its difference is not a difference of sheer deficiency dropping from act into potency, but rather a lateral difference that diagonally exceeds such that it can be neither added to nor subtracted in value from its originary source. The difference of the plant from the animal can, for this reason, never be strictly evaluated according to any privileged identity of anthropocentric reason. Rather, it exhibits not only a vertical relation of the Son to the Father, but also a lateral relation from God to the Holy Spirit, as the first difference of the Son from the Father is instantly related through an other, through the Spirit, and altogether as one—like the light of the leaf shining forth from the depths of any flower.

The Church can thus be truly named a “vineyard of the Lord” (Isa. 5:7). For the Eucharist is drawn from the fruit of the plant, as a recollection of the ‘Bread of Life’ that is drawn from the Tree of Life (Gen. 2:9, 3:22; Prov. 3:18; Jn. 1:4, 6:35, 14:6; Rev. 2:7, 22:2–14). The words of the eucharistic consecration, “this is my body”, and “this is my blood”, refer essentially to the body and blood of Christ, but, as the *Logos* is the principle of creation, also to the material accidents of bread and wine (Mt. 26:26; Mk. 14:22; Lk. 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24). The Eucharist appears in this light, not only as a repetition of Abel’s sacrifice of the animal, but also as a healing remedy for Cain’s refused sacrifice of the plant, in the bread of the wheat, as in the wine of the grape (Gen. 4:1–8, 22:13). The fruit of the plant is thus continuously offered for the corporate spiritual cultivation of all who can receive, sacrifice, and give again in a spiritual garden of accelerating gratuity (Gen. 9:20; Is. 5:1–10; Mt. 20:1–8, 21:28–41; Mk. 12:1–9; Lk. 13:7, 20:10–16).

Christian eco-criticism can, as this essay suggests, recommend a new way of reading the signs of the plant in a hermeneutic circle that cycles in and from the divine Life of Christ. For it reads, not only of a negative subtraction of the parts over the whole, but of a more vegetal, tactile, and erotic ascent in unknowing to and from the knowledge and love of God. The intelligible species of the plant are exemplified as *logoi spermatikoi* in the ‘Tree of Life’, as much of a vegetal, as of an angelic *protoevangelium* of Christ in the saving fruit of the ‘Tree of Jesse’ (Lk. 3:23–38). And since these *logoi* are originally spoken of in and by the *Logos*, and the *Logos* is spoken eternally by the Son of God as Trinity, the divine difference of the Trinity can be observed to unfold from the absolutely originary centre of all relations as it is cut across the vegetal difference of the plant in a ‘theological botany’, as ultimately across the ontological difference of beings from Being in a Trinitarian Ontology (Hemmerle 2020). The Holy Trinity is, we may say, eternally and at once the secret centre of creation, as well as of the hidden Life of the plant. As the leaves that once fall away ever again return in the spring, we may once more search to discover the light of the leaf shining from the hidden depths of any flower.

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