

11 Nature trouble

Ancient *physis* and queer performativity

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The question of nature—its value, function, and meaning—has been alive in feminist thought almost from its inception. There exists, of course, a long and well-attested history—perhaps even a prehistory—of associations of women with the domain of the natural, along with a complex history of feminist attempts to negotiate, grapple with, and twist free from their grip. Without offering a comprehensive rehearsal of these histories, I would like to frame the problem as one that emerges with unprecedented philosophical distinctness somewhere in the early 1990s, in a tension whose poles bear the names of Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz.¹ Butler, on the one hand, posits the “nature” of gender (that is, sex) as an *effect* of practices, while Grosz draws on an alternate monist ontology to cast the body as natural object as a site of unknowable or unexpected “volatile” activity on the other. In order to interrogate a certain Western inception of this longstanding association of nature and the feminine, I will in this paper return to a phenomenological conception of nature, or *physis*, that first appears in early Greek thinking. In so doing, I will draw on the twin figures of Luce Irigaray and John Sallis for interpretive assistance, as well as the metaphors of performance and theater found in Butler’s thinking, to consider the shape, form, and style of the dynamics of emergence and concealment we might phenomenologically comprehend in relation to Being and beings, and in particular those beings that emerge and withdraw independently of, and alongside, human beings. As phenomenologists in the Heideggerian tradition have emphasized, nature, or *physis*, is understood in these early Greek texts not as a determinate region of Being calling for investigation, not as a hidden essence of things, and certainly not as a hypostatized or totalizable system of parts and wholes (as it will come to be formulated for the Stoics).² Certainly, it cannot be addressed as a region of

¹ This moment, and its tensions, is beautifully articulated in Pheng Cheah’s 1996 review essay discussing Butler (1993) and Grosz (1994).

² See Holmes in this volume for an elaboration of the Stoic conception of Nature.

Objecthood against which the human might stand over as Subject, in distinction to Porter's approach (in this volume).³ Rather, I will show, the complex of natural beings we call *physis* is to be apprehended performatively as a field of dynamic coming to be and passing away, approach and receding, in which the possibility of differentiating essence or truth from dissimulation and display is increasingly compromised, and in which the longstanding Western coupling of "nature" and "the feminine" may be newly discerned as strictly ungroundable.

Butler's famous and arguably almost now hegemonic argument in *Gender Trouble* regards gender as something rooted not in biological sex, but in a sedimentation of practices, gestures, and acts, as something that we *do* rather than something that we *are*.⁴ The appearance of this text almost instantly gave rise to feminist worries about the fate of the body, the material substrate, the part of our existence that might be attributed to nature as opposed to culture in this performative scene, and thus to calls for a certain *renaturalization* within feminist discourse.⁵ Such calls for a return to nature also required a reconceptualization of nature, which heretofore signified for feminism first and foremost a domain of necessity, of stasis, cyclicity, repetition, and of unfreedom; so conceived, nature is justly a shackle for women, characterizing their bodies, lives, and their labor, from which feminists sought to break free. A reconceptualization of nature or matter as possessing its own sort of motility, vitality, volatility, or vibrancy, then, has been the principal aim of the new materialist and posthuman turn within feminism, whose most pioneering and philosophically penetrating voice up until now has been that of Elizabeth Grosz.

In *Volatile Bodies* and subsequent work, Grosz has drawn upon an alternate, non-dualistic philosophical tradition rooted in the philosophy of Spinoza and which is traced through the thought of Nietzsche, Deleuze, Bergson, Darwin, and Alphonso Lingis. In Grosz's reading of this tradition, political life is primarily constituted by forces, powers, and dynamics that traverse all previously separated spheres of existence:

³ Porter in this volume. Payne's investigation of chorality (in this volume), by contrast, invokes a life of song shared among natural beings and humans as a reparative scene which also seeks to bypass this essentially modern topology of subject and object, though for him (Hellenistic, rather than archaic) poetry as representational form is essentially at odds with the nature it seeks to represent, even if he also offers a vision of an (if momentary) overcoming.

⁴ The mainstream acceptance of Butler's thinking in our current moment is evidenced by the June 21, 2016 cover story, "Think Gender Is Performance? You Have Judith Butler to Thank for That" (Fischer (2016)) in *The Cut*, New York Magazine.

⁵ See, for example, Bigwood (1991), published one year after *Gender Trouble's* appearance.

natural, human, technical, ethical, political. Hasana Sharp has astutely mapped this terrain in *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, showing how Grosz's work challenges and turns away from a strictly human politics framed by the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave and the struggle for recognition, which in recent decades has been most trenchantly explored in the work of Judith Butler.⁶ As Sharp sees it, the virtue of Grosz's position is that it stresses a politics of empowerment along Spinozist lines, one in which embracing our being as a part of nature counters social designations of unworthiness or abjection by emphasizing our forceful, inherently worthy, energetic becoming, and which sidesteps any requirement that I be *recognized by* an Other in order to accede to legitimate social or indeed personal subjecthood. Grosz's Spinozist-Deleuzian thinking, in which material forces and intensities traverse natural and human worlds, has since been developed by other feminist thinkers such as Rosi Braidotti, Luciana Parisi, Clare Colebrook, and Jami Weinstein, and its echoes may also be found in the vital materialist political thought of Jane Bennett and William Connolly, in the thinking of Négritude from Franz Fanon to Donna Jones, by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and Diana Leong in recent Black studies, and in the queer of color theoretical work of Jasbir Puar and Mel Chen.⁷ At the same time, a quasi-atomist strand of feminist thinking has emerged in the work of Karen Barad, which focuses on the motility and unpredictability or indeterminacy of natural forces at the quantum level, and finds there a resource for thinking through ethical and political relations in and between natural and human worlds. The work of Donna Haraway has in turn inaugurated a new terrain, also traversed by thinkers such as Kathryn Hayles and Patricia Clough, in which the technological, the informational, and the natural ineluctably interpenetrate one another; seeing them as separate spheres of existence has for these thinkers consequently become not just undesirable but perhaps even impossible.⁸ This cursory map of new materialist and posthumanist feminist engagements with the natural can only offer a brief glimpse of the paths through which "nature" and its relationship to women or the feminine is being reconceived and reconfigured alongside a newly ecological political sensibility occasioned by global warming, climate change, and the intensification of the interpenetration of the human and the natural

⁶ Sharp (2011).

⁷ See, for example: Braidotti (2013), Colebrook (2009) 77–92, Parisi (2010), Weinstein (2010), Bennett (2010), Connolly (2011), Fanon (1967), Jones (2010), Jackson (2016), Leong (2016), Puar (2007), and Chen (2012).

⁸ See, for example, Haraway (1991), Hayles (1999), and Clough (2000).

signified by our newly named if contested entry into the epoch of the Anthropocene. On the one hand, the Spinozist-Deleuzian strain heralded by Grosz relies on a monist ontology in which forces and intensities flow across regions of existence and levels of analysis typically held as distinct, such as the physical and the social; thus *the very same* dynamics (which may, as in the work of Manuel DeLanda,⁹ be modeled on nonlinear mathematical equations) are seen to apply in utterly diverse scenarios that have traditionally required different tools for understanding, such as weather patterns, economic booms and busts, flows of information, group power dynamics, food chains, subcellular molecular processes, or even the waves and particles of quantum physics. On the other hand, in the work of Karen Barad, to which I will return toward the end of this paper, it is sometimes unclear whether the forces at work in the entanglements and intra-actions she describes at the level of quantum physics are to be understood as also literally operating at the macro-level, or as a master analogy through which such phenomena (at the levels of the social, cultural, political, technical, human, animal, and vegetable) may be usefully illuminated and understood. While the Groszian philosophical materialism may be more philosophically suggestive and supportable (though perhaps its monism has a flattening effect, especially when contrasted with a phenomenological approach), it will be Barad's version of materialism that I grapple with in this paper. As she develops her physicalist position, Barad embraces too the language of phenomenology and performativity. As the latter comprise the key philosophical apparatus I develop in this paper, it is especially important that these terms be clearly distinguished from what I see as the rather questionable use to which they are put in her philosophical ontology.

If we are to explore the meaning or significance of this move to renaturalization within feminist theory, we must first consider the significance of the notion of a return, a restitution, or perhaps a reconstruction of that from which we have apparently strayed. Does this movement of a return to nature signaled by "renaturalization" in some sense repeat what has always been true of an investigation into nature? As John Sallis puts it, it is "as if in questioning about nature, one could not avoid the circularity of asking about the nature of nature."¹⁰ In this formulation, nature takes on all the abyssal metaphysical weight of essence, principle, or *archē*, that which promises, in its final revelation, to satisfy the hungriest of desires to know. And the figure of woman herself, posed as riddle or mystery, often takes the place of such a lure.¹¹ Woman as the

⁹ See e.g. DeLanda (1992).

¹⁰ Sallis (2000).

¹¹ Hadot (2006).

nontruth of truth, she who must be stripped bare, unveiled, to reveal . . . ? Feminist renaturalizations have thus strenuously sought to avoid charges of essentialism, that is, they have deliberately situated themselves using philosophical resources that are at odds with or have distanced themselves from an essentialist metaphysical tradition rooted in the Platonic *eidos* or *idea* and the Aristotelian *to ti ēn einai*, passed down to us as *essence*: the “what it is to be something”. What, then, might a return to Greek antiquity contribute to this terrain?

The Heideggerian tradition in which Sallis writes is certainly concerned with re-opening the philosophical question of nature, and doing so by means of a return to the opening of Western philosophy as such, in Greek antiquity. Especially, such re-opening is anticipated in the philosophical thinking that takes place prior to the sway of Platonic metaphysics, in which, according to Sallis, “philosophy turns away from nature and ventures the *deuteros plous* [the famous “second sailing” of the *Phaedo*] by which it would set out for the intelligible.”¹² The earliest thinkers we call philosophers were, after all, designated by later Greeks as the *physikoi*, the ones who investigated nature, or *physis*; this Presocratic thinking about *physis*, from the Greek verb *phyō-phyomai*, to grow, beget, or to be born, will be my concern, and hence we will travel back behind, to the hither side of metaphysics, to Homer, to the Milesians, to Heraclitus, and to Empedocles, to think about first beginnings as such.

Does the move toward first beginnings in some sense repeat and deepen, by pushing further back, the desire for a return to origin as essence? Nature, we might say, still functions here as a lure. Nature-origin-lure. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. For it is precisely the desire for a kind of unveiling or revelation in relation to nature that will be my theme in what follows, along with its ineluctably gendered dimensions. And it is within the terms of a specifically phenomenological approach to nature, developed most fully in relation to Presocratic thinking in the work of John Sallis and Luce Irigaray, that a certain dynamics of revealing and concealment in relation to nature may be discerned. Furthermore, this phenomenology of *physis* will be put into conversation with the Butlerian account of gender performativity. My aims here are multiple. In the first place, the Butlerian turn to a performative account of gender will be resituated and shown to be consistent with a phenomenological ontology in which *physis* is a central term. This approach not only reimagines performativity to be at work in

¹² Sallis (2000) 149.

non-human contexts, but it also diverges from the uptake of both the notion of the phenomenon and performativity in the work of Karen Barad, insofar as it emphasizes a phenomenological dynamics of showing, hiding, and responding rather than a dynamics of intra-action and entanglement, derived from quantum physics, upon which her thinking insists. Instead, there will be foregrounded not only the coming to be and passing away of beings, their showing-forth and their withdrawal, but also the simultaneous spacing, clearing, opening, and lighting, not to mention occluding, which necessarily accompanies such showing forth, and constitutes in one sense an elemental surround, but in another the very stage upon which things come into appearance. Here, then, there is a perhaps too-literal thinking of performativity—less as an ontology of acts that congeal into an ontology of substance—but of the dimension of performativity that involves a perceptual, sensory *appearing before and shining forth*, and which is also always a concealment or occlusion. A resuscitation of a dramaturgical dimension of performativity—this time without humans—which returns to the very drag performances and their play of images, of truth and falsity, obfuscation and revelation that are at the carnal, beating heart of the arguments of *Gender Trouble*, will thus be centrally at stake here.

Butler's theory of performativity has been understood by proponents of renaturalization such as Grosz and Sharp (and by others such as Bonnie Honig), as primarily constituted by a humanist dynamics of recognition rooted in the Hegelian dialectic of lordship and bondage.¹³ According to this scenario, accession to subjectivity is dependent on recognition by a human other, the Master, the prerequisite of which is a certain legibility and legitimacy whose terms and limits are dictated by the existing hegemonic situation. In this way, some modes of life—heterosexual, cisgendered, white, wealthy, Western—are understood as more worthy of personhood, and the loss of such lives more inherently grievable, than others. In the domain of gender, ways of being gendered are thus only legitimate, worthy of recognition, or even *legible*, if they conform to a preexisting social, cultural, and political hegemony, a presumptive alignment of sex, gender, and sexuality in which biological or “natural” sex is understood as giving rise seamlessly to a corresponding gender expression and sexual orientation. Nature, here, functions as a stable ground or origin that gives rise to varied forms of cultural, social, and sexual expression which may or may not be rewarded for their conformity to the preexisting order. In the face of this, Butler will insist

¹³ See Grosz (2005), Sharp (2011), and Honig (2013).

that gender does not organically arise out of natural sex, but is rather ontologically constituted and maintained by the iteration and sedimentation of acts in relation to norms (consisting of hegemonically legitimated acts, congealed, sedimented, abstracted, and made “permanent”) over time. Gender arises and persists at the surface of the body, and at the level of the social—at once normative, political, and juridical. It is maintained in and through a sociocultural order, a natively conservative heterosexual matrix constituted by regulative limitations on what kinds of bodies, and what coordinated configuration of bodily acts, desires, and sexual proclivities, may appear as legible and legitimate. A key function of this heterosexual matrix is that it also *deploys* nature—naturalized categories of sex, and a naturalized teleology of sex/gender—in order to bolster, legitimize, and eternalize itself. There is a complex movement here, in which life at the level of culture, at the level of meaningful acts, is prioritized over the being of natural life, and sex at the level of nature is thereby reconceived as a function of cultural practices of gender.

Notable here is that the motility, the work—the productive activity that takes place in the construction and perpetuation of the sex-gender system—operates only at the level of the human. If there is a substratum of “matter itself,” or “bodies themselves,” these only take on social, and thus ontological, significance insofar as they are taken up into a system of legibility: this system and the practices that comprise it may be designated by the human domains of *logos* and of law. Nature then appears *after* the fact, as an effect of human practices, albeit one with an almost limitless power of social legitimation. If anything lies there prior to being taken up into human life, this very “lying there before” only appears itself as a function of human activity. Perhaps we could say, in Heideggerian language, that it lies there as a standing reserve, meaningless in itself, passively waiting to be taken up into a human economy of appearing, meaning, and being. However we think of it, it is clear that, according to this analysis (whose Kantian roots are now evident), it would be incoherent or meaningless to make any claims about how or what it is, or what it does in itself. At stake in Grosz’s turn back toward nature, then, is that it returns to nature the power of motility, the power of becoming, the power of appearing and being apprehensible, an apprehendibility in its own right. And it is at this point where the ancient thought of nature as *physis*, as growing, emerging, appearing, and becoming in the non-human, non-technical sense, as essentially *motile and phenomenal*, becomes newly pertinent.

The phenomenological reading of performativity I will develop thus emphasizes a dynamics of performativity *already at work within*

nature itself.¹⁴ The force of performativity in this context is such that in emphasizing an interactive field of doing, acting, and perceiving at the expense of preexisting doers, actors, or perceivers (“there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything,”¹⁵ as Butler famously quotes from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*), it severs the “essential” ties (which are now shown to be hegemonic effects) between the natural or biological, the field of gender expression, and the field of erotic desire, sexual orientation, and sexual expression. There are no fixed destinies of anatomy or of desire except the ones put in place, sedimented and sanctioned by regimes of power, hitherto the hegemonic “heterosexual matrix.” In the absence of essential or determinate telic gridlines, there are significations and lines of development at all of these levels (anatomy, gender, desire) that may move and branch in multiple directions, in ways that are not shackled to one another in advance, that is, queerly. Nature, understood both as a dimension of human existence but also as the non-human world, may thus show forth not only in terms of a normative grid or matrix whose terms are always determined and delimited in advance by language, culture, and hegemony, but in and for itself. Contra to any ends-governed version of Darwinism (sociobiological or social Darwinist), nature can be seen to show itself forth, and further, to perform itself to itself, in ways that are insistently wayward, marvelous, excessive, and queer. Nature, *physis*, reconceived as a site of phenomenological performativity may thus be apprehended as always already in a certain excess of itself, always already queer, always already monstrous, and monstrating.

So, let us follow the lure of origin and trace, if not to reconstruct a comprehensive genealogy of *physis* in early Greek thinking, then at least to examine some select *topoi*, with the hope of shedding some light on nature, its mode of appearing, and our thirst for knowledge of nature from which “nature itself” can perhaps never be completely separated. The word *physis* is first recorded in ancient Greece literature in the tenth book of Homer’s *Odyssey*, at 10.305. This appearance is a *hapax legomenon*. Although the verb *phyō-phyomai*, to bring forth, to beget, to grow, to be born, occurs relatively frequently, this is the only time it appears in a nominal form in the Homeric corpus. As Gerard Naddaf explains, with recourse to linguist Émile Benveniste, the word formed by adding the *-sis* suffix to *phyō-* is an action noun that denotes “the (completed) realization of a becoming—that

¹⁴ By “dynamics” in this context I mean simply to signify the essentially moving and motile quality of phenomena, and less to reference any Aristotelian or post-Aristotelian metaphysics of *dynamis* (potentiality, potency, capacity, power).

¹⁵ Butler (1990) 24.

is to say, the nature [of a thing] as it is realized, with all its properties.”¹⁶ However useful (and in the service of Naddaf’s more general thesis regarding the meaning of *physis* as an all-encompassing completed process, given from beginning to end), this analysis gives the impression of a quite anachronistic, Aristotelian, teleological overlay. A comparison with similarly formed words, such as *poiēsis* (poetry or technical making), *dosis* (the act of giving or a gift), *phthisis* (decay), shows that a sense of completion is not a necessary aspect of this part of speech, but rather it may refer simply to a process that is ongoing; indeed they are often translated into English as gerunds.¹⁷ And indeed, for present purposes, I would like to de-emphasize a teleological dimension of *physis* even though the paradigm of the animal organism as a developing totality would seem to lend itself supremely to such a conception. To do so, we must turn to the Homeric context.

We find ourselves in the part of the text where Odysseus is relating his adventures with witches, monsters, and the realm of the dead, that is, his encounters with supernatural realms and beings, or as Dennis Schmidt puts it, “with a natural world that is full of strangeness and surprise.”¹⁸ Specifically, it is in the episode where Odysseus is seeking to free his comrades who have been captured and turned into pigs by the *pharmakeia*, the sorceress Circe. Hermes appears to Odysseus as a guide, and tells him of a mysterious herb called “Moly”: a *pharmakon*—thus both a poison and a cure, indeterminately—that will protect him from Circe’s own potions and metamorphic spells. Once it is clear that he is immune to her drugs, Odysseus is to rush upon Circe with his sword in response to her attack with a “long wand,” and she will deflect his attack by inviting him to her bedchamber. He is to comply with her request as the path through which he will persuade her to release his crewmen. The pharmacological battle is thus closely allied with and makes way for an erotic struggle, an ever-present field of pleasure and danger for Odysseus. Homer writes,

So saying, Argeiphontes¹⁹ gave me the herb, drawing it from the ground, and showed me its nature (*physis*). At the root it was black, but its flower was like milk. Moly the gods call it, and it is hard for mortal men to dig; but with the gods all things are possible.²⁰

¹⁶ Naddaf (2005) 12.

¹⁷ See Herbert Weir Smyth, §840 “Names of Actions and Abstract Substantives,” in Smyth (1920) 230.

¹⁸ Schmidt (2013) 168.

¹⁹ The epithet means “Argus-slayer.” In another battle-scene of eros, charms, and wiles, it was Hermes who liberated Io, the lover of Zeus, from the hundred-eyed giant Argus, who had been ordered by Hera, the jealous wife of Zeus, to watch over her. Hermes charmed the giant with his flute, and while Argus slept Hermes cut off his head and released Io.

²⁰ Homer, *Odyssey* 10.302–5, trans. A. T. Murray.

The god shows the mortal the plant's *physis*, and what the reader learns is something of its structure, a black root and a flower like milk.²¹ The *physis* here does not seem to refer to the magical inner secret of the plant, its pharmacological essence, but rather we are given its outward appearance: a root, black, normally hidden, an underground origin that may not easily succumb to the light of knowledge or to the clear light of day. And a flower, like milk, white, nourishing, natal, maternal, reaching out toward and emerging into the openness of the world. Moly, and its *physis*, is hard for mortal men to dig (the Greek *oryssein*, to dig, does not possess the metaphorical resonance of the English but for us it may be unavoidable). Gods, however, possess the power of unconcealment and may demonstrate (*deiknymi*—to bring to light, to show forth, to point out or explain) *physis* to a mortal.²² Both Naddaf and Schmidt emphasize the totality of the plant that is thus revealed—as Schmidt puts it, “the movement that makes this plant whole and that brings it to realization.”²³ Again, it is less a revelation of a totality, fully present in its completeness, that I wish to stress, although uprooting the plant undeniably reveals its entire outline and structure. Rather, it is an ongoing movement. For the *physis* that is so revealed is one in which revelation itself, *physis* as emerging into openness, is at issue. The outward appearance betrays nothing of an inner “nature.” And yet we can observe in the plant's structure a movement that has taken place from a chthonic darkness, a hiddenness of the black root beneath the earth, to a flowering forth into the light, into the open, into appearance: white like milk, maternal and nourishing. Simultaneously vegetal and mammalian, chimerical, monstrous hybrid, this *physis* speaks not only to movements of both emergence and withdrawal, but also to the order of animal and human birthing: the insistent metaphorization of woman as fecund earth in ancient Greece so thoroughly investigated by Page duBois in *Sowing the Body*, as well as to the archaic myth of Demeter and Persephone told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.²⁴

That story also begins with the uprooting of a plant, the wondrous (*thaumaston*) Narcissus “grown as a lure” (*physe dolon*) by Gaia at the behest of Zeus, whose very *physis* might thus be said to constitute a lure. The mirrorings are multiple. Persephone, justly amazed (*thambēsas*),

²¹ The exact plant that is being referred to is unknown, though has been much speculated upon. Schmidt (2013) cites a number of these investigations, noting that the mystery is hardly surprising since it is a divine name we are given, and not a mortal one (169).

²² Heubeck's commentary (Heubeck and Hoekstra (1990)), notes that *deiknymi*'s sense of explaining or giving instruction counts as evidence that *physis* may mean “the hidden power within the plant” (60), a reading I counter so as to desubstantialize ancient *physis*.

²³ Schmidt (2013) 169. ²⁴ duBois (1988).

plucks the flower, but the earth yawns open (Gaia's complicity in rending Demeter from Persephone cannot be overlooked), allowing Hades to abduct her and conceal her beneath. In this, arguably one of patriarchy's supreme founding gestures, the relationship between mother and daughter is interrupted, and Demeter's power to withhold the earth's fruitfulness thereby activated.²⁵ As Cavarero has deftly shown, the order of generation is here countered by an even greater power than that of death, namely the breathtaking, all-encompassing feminine power of withholding life; a power and a counter-power within *physis* itself.²⁶ The movement of *physis* transgresses the boundary represented by the surface of the earth. Its nourishing, maternal, animal flowering forth cannot be severed from its vegetal rootedness in the dark earth, a revelation that discloses the unquenchable persistence of concealment, and which in turn grounds the duplicity of the *pharmakon* as cure and poison, as prophylactic and potential danger. As divinely named *pharmakon*, somewhere between animal and plant, the Moly plant is thus distinguished from its environs—the elements of earth, air, fire, and water, and the other plants making up the landscape upon which the scene is set (though the later Empedoclean designation of these “elements” as themselves roots (DK 6) complicates even this separation). Excessive and monstrous, yet capable of protecting Odysseus against monstrous transformation; brought to light and indicated by Hermes, psychopomp and catabatic guide to the underworld; Moly's nature is a double demonstration of monstration, a double dynamic of emergence and hiddenness, in and through itself.

The vegetal provenance of *physis* is echoed in Heidegger's analysis of Aristotle's *Physics* II.i. For Heidegger, the movement of appearing and withdrawal in nature is characterized par excellence by the growth of plants. In *physis*, he writes, “while the blossom ‘buds forth’ [*phyei*], the leaves that prepared for the blossom now fall off. The fruit comes to light, while the blossom disappears.”²⁷ And “the plant in the form of fruit goes back into its seed, which, according to its essence, is nothing else but a going-forth into the appearance, *ὁδὸς φύσεως εἰς φύσιν*.”²⁸ This budding, flowering, fruiting, and seeding illustrates the “way by nature into nature” (which, according to Aristotle, is also spoken of as *genesis* or coming to be by nature, as at *Physics* 193b13). It takes place in a constant forward movement that is always also a recession or return, a folding back into itself. It is perhaps easy to read in this cycle of vegetal growth a

²⁵ For a contemporary retrieval of this story for feminist politics see Rawlinson (2016), esp. ch. 4.

²⁶ Cavarero (1995) 57–90.

²⁷ Heidegger (1998) 227.

²⁸ Heidegger (1998) 227.

teleological unfolding of potentiality into actuality that then enters into the reproductive cyclicality of nature, one that emulates the perfect circular motion of the heavens and thus a cosmic order of becoming oriented toward the divine and the good.²⁹ Heidegger, however, seeks another meaning in *Physics* II.i, which bears continuity with the more archaic Greek sense of *physis*, found in the following passage toward the close of the chapter: “ἡ δὲ γὰρ μορφὴ καὶ ἡ φύσις διχῶς λέγεται· καὶ γὰρ ἡ στέρησις εἶδος πῶς ἔστιν. Form (*morphē*) and nature (*physis*) are said in two ways, for privation, too, is in a way a form (*eidōs*).”³⁰ *Sterēsis*, privation or absencing, appears alongside presencing and emergence as inherent to, as part of the very movement of *physis*, and thus appears *as such*, as *eidōs*, alongside the positive appearance of whatever takes shape in nature. As Heidegger puts it, “The self-placing into the appearance, the *μορφὴ*, has a *στέρησις*-character, and this now means: *μορφὴ* is *διχῶς*, *intrinsically twofold*, the presencing of an absencing.”³¹ We can see, then, how in Heidegger’s reading *physis* designates a realm in which the growing, emerging, and withdrawing motility of nature might be discerned all at once, as well as the later metaphysical overlay, the principle of this nature as a final form, *telos*, or essence.

John Sallis’s recent diptych of works on nature, *The Return of Nature* and *The Figure of Nature*, provide a comprehensive post-Heideggerian phenomenological analysis of the early Greek thinking on *physis*, which takes for its bass-note this doubled, motile scene.³² The Milesian *physikoi* are reputed, through a much contested and distant retrojection by historians of philosophy several centuries later, to have taken *physis* as their subject, turning to elemental principles—water, air, earth, fire, the hot and cold, the wet and dry, as the foundational originary principles—*archai*—of the cosmos. This “*peri physeōs*” tradition, extending onward to the thought of numerous Presocratics including Heraclitus, Empedocles, and Parmenides, is said to have decisively wrenched the discourse on origins from mythology into the sphere of nature, and on this new footing to have founded philosophy as we understand it.³³ While we do

²⁹ For an extended account of the relationship between earthly cycles and heavenly motion as both mimetic and material in Aristotle see my *The Feminine Symptom* (Bianchi (2014)) 157–64.

³⁰ Aristotle, *Physics* 193b20–1. ³¹ Heidegger (1998) 227.

³² Sallis (2016a) and Sallis (2016b).

³³ See Sallis’s careful account of the difficulties with both evidence and interpretation of this tradition in Sallis (2016a) 13–17. Sallis’s narration of the passage from myth to philosophical *physis* (3–12) places the Olympian goddess Artemis, the virgin huntress, as the primary representative of the natural, whereas *physis* is arguably represented more vividly in myth in the archaic tradition of fertility goddesses who govern generation, death, and the chthonic proliferation of life, from Inanna and Ishtar in the ancient Near East to

not encounter the word *physis* itself in this tradition until Heraclitus, the early Ionian thinkers Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes are said to have looked to elements of the natural world: to water; to the boundless *apeiron* that functions as the source of the opposing natural principles—wet and dry, hot and cold; and to air, respectively, as cosmogonical and cosmological *archai*. This much is familiar from any basic introduction to the Presocratics. And yet Sallis will treat this tradition of early Greek thinking not as a turn to a scientific or “naturalistic” account of cosmic composition or ultimate constituents, nor as a cosmogonic account of origins, and even less as a thinking of natural coming to be on the model of artifactual production or *poiēsis* in which form is imposed upon matter, but as a phenomenological story about *physis* as coming to appearance.³⁴ The very notion of an “element” is not even fitting in this context, since “element” derives from the more or less direct Latin translation of the Greek *stoicheion*, and its usage in this sense emerges only later; according to Aristotle it initially referred to a constituent from which a thing is composed and which cannot be further divided, such as the letters or sounds from which utterances are made up.³⁵ Not only does such a compositional or decompositional approach to understanding *physis* as that *from which* things are composed reduce it to something like a metaphysical substance, a thing among things, but as Sallis points out it is already to understand it in the technical-scientific frame of the “mathematical project of modern physics.”³⁶ He reminds us that the Presocratics do not speak of “elements” (*stoicheia*) at all; Empedocles, as we saw, speaks (in DK 6) of the four roots, *rhizomata*. Once again the vegetal analogy—the elements given not as building blocks, but as roots through which passes the manifestation, the flowering forth of things.

In particular, Sallis draws our attention to perhaps the most overlooked of these thinkers, Anaximenes, and his discourse on *aēr*. He reminds us that in the early Greek texts of Homer and Hesiod, *aēr* refers to mist, to cloud, to air that is substantial, damp, dark, thick, and obscuring. This is in contrast to *aithēr*, the bright shining upper air of the highest heavens. Nonetheless, by the sixth century BCE it seems to

Gaia, Demeter, and Persephone in Greece. The split in the feminine functions in the Olympian pantheon between Hera as wife and matron, Aphrodite as goddess of sex and love, Athena as goddess of cunning and wisdom, and Artemis as virgin huntress seems to have already apportioned the capricious forces of archaic fecundity according to a patriarchal optic of management and control.

³⁴ See Sallis (2016b) 30.

³⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* V.iii. 1014a26–b15. For a fine discussion of the philological evidence and related semantic issues see Crowley (2005) 367–94.

³⁶ See Sallis (2000) 154.

correspond to the meaning it holds for us—that of the open and transparent medium in which we are immersed, that which we perceive as wind, and that which we breathe and which therefore has a connection to life.³⁷ A brief reflection on Heidegger’s etymology of “phenomenon” in the Introduction to *Being and Time*—as comprised of the middle-voiced construction of the verb *phainō*, *phainesthai*, to bring into daylight, to place in brightness, gives a hint of why this element *aēr* should be so important for Sallis—“Thus the meaning of the expression ‘phenomenon’ is established as *what shows itself in itself*, what is manifest.”³⁸ For air is at once a “stuff,” and thus an entity, a kind of being within the natural world along with earth, fire, and water—perceptible and substantial—and that which opens a space, as a material envelope that approximates the immaterial, that allows without resistance for the showing forth of things within it. As Theophrastus’ testimonial fragment (DK A5) tells us,

Anaximenes, son of Eurystratus of Miletus, who became a companion of Anaximander, also says, like him, that the underlying nature (*hypokeimenēn physin*) is one and unlimited (*apeiron*), but not undefined as Anaximander said but definite (*hōrismenēn*), for he calls it (*legōn*) *aēr*, and it differs in its substance (*kata tas ousias*) by rarity and density. Being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these. He, too, makes motion (*kinēsis*) eternal, and that it is through this that change comes about.”³⁹

From the outset, we will need to set aside Theophrastus’ Aristotelian optic of an “underlying nature,” although it is also of course through Aristotle that we understand the Milesian *physikoi* as being concerned primarily with *archē*: first principle, beginning, source, that which rules.⁴⁰ Sallis points out that, like Anaximander’s *archē*, *aēr* is unlimited, *apeiron*. As one, it has a definition or a *horos* and is identifiable as such in *logos*, but it has no *peras* or limit. As such, if we are to translate *archē* as beginning, “then we could say that it is a beginning that has no beginning, a beginning

³⁷ Sallis (2016a) 20.

³⁸ Heidegger (2010a) 27, original emphasis.

³⁹ Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983) 145. Using many of the same terms, and more pungent and evocative for my present purposes, though undoubtedly spurious, Fragment B3 reads: “Anaximenes arrived at the conclusion that air is the one, movable, infinite, first principle of all things. For he speaks as follows: ‘Air is the nearest to an immaterial thing; since through the outflowing arising therefrom, it is necessary that it should be infinite and abundant, because it is never exhausted.’” The fragment is found in an alchemical text of Olympiodorus (or Pseudo-Olympiodorus), however it is not just context that renders it questionable, but in particular the fragment’s anachronistic use of “immaterial” (*asōmatos*). See Renehan (1980) 119–20. I am indebted to Rhodes Pinto, in personal communication, for helpful clarification of these textual and philological issues.

⁴⁰ *Archē* is such a key word for Aristotle that it is the first of the thirty entries in his philosophical dictionary, Book Delta of the *Metaphysics* (1012b34–1013a23).

before beginning"⁴¹ (22). This aporia, this duplicity that shows itself at the origin, is further reflected in the necessary division or differentiation that air portends, since air is always there, alongside and in excess of any other being that emerges forth into the open, any manifestation of the other elements. Air *is*, it is a being apparent to our senses, but also a medium *through* which much of what we sense is transmitted—sound, vision, smell—and that *in* which what comes to appearance does so, thus forming the necessary ground to any possible figure, so to speak, but a groundless ground, flowing and excessive. As Luce Irigaray writes in *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, “No other element carries with it, or lets itself be passed through by—light and shadow, voice and silence. No other element is to this extent opening itself—to one who would have not forgotten its nature there is no need for it to open or re-open.”⁴² Thus, she insists, the terms that then emerge as central for the later Heidegger—clearing, lighting, and opening—require this forgotten medium of air, an element infinite and flowing, for their sustenance. Irigaray shows how air as material envelope, as that which makes possible the region of the open, the clearing, the lighting, is forgotten and left unmourned in Heidegger’s phenomenological thinking. This giving of air is moreover also what is given, freely, abundantly, without reserve, as oxygen in the mother’s blood. “No gap, breach, spacing, or distancing is possible between the living organism and the blood that has always already nourished it, including with oxygen. Nor is there any more of a gap between it and the ambient air it continuously breathes once born.”⁴³ The mother and air, both giving without reserve as origin and ground of being-there, are forgotten equally in the discourses of philosophy. This intimacy between air/mother and *Dasein*, though in actuality life-giving, then appears according to the terms of Western philosophy and the patriarchal imaginary as—all too ironically—too close for comfort, suffocating, abyssal, terrifying. For Irigaray, this in turn provides the impetus for the phallic standing-out of *Dasein*, its projection into *ek-stasis*. Although he does not cite Irigaray, nor consider the dimension of sexual difference, Sallis might thus be seen as answering Irigaray’s call for a philosophical phenomenology of the two.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Sallis (2016a) 22.

⁴² Irigaray (1999) 8.

⁴³ Irigaray (1999) 84.

⁴⁴ In her key article, “Questioning nature: Irigaray, Heidegger and the potentiality of matter” (Fielding (2003)), Helen Fielding puts Irigaray’s critique of Heidegger, equally pertinent to Sallis, thus: “The problem for Irigaray is that even as Heidegger opens up the history of Western philosophy to reveal the forgetting of being, he himself does not recognize the two-fold essence of being as that of sexual difference, despite the fact that sexual difference is phenomenologically and universally evident” (6). While, given the great mass of asexually reproducing “lower” organisms, it is not quite justified to claim universality for sexual difference, it certainly pervades the animal and plant kingdoms in a way that is phenomenologically and ontologically endemic. For views that see the twofoldness of

For Sallis the duplicity of beginnings, of the philosophical desire for origin, is not thematized as riven by sexual difference, nor does he consider the carnal debt to the mother's body as an element and ground of giving. Yet in his phenomenological attention to *aēr* there is an implicit response to Irigaray's critique of philosophy as a "closed universe of thought,"⁴⁵ in which the encircling of air—fluid and life-giving—is erased and eclipsed by the Parmenidean circle of being and thought as one, as the One. Irigaray discloses the dimension of desire for the sexually other as intimately linked to the recollection of air as infinitely giving, and infinitely withdrawing, and here, Sallis's attentiveness to its doubled origin might give way to an operation in which sexual difference might, too, begin to appear for the first time.

Listening to Irigaray, we learn that any project of renaturalization within Western philosophical thought, and *a fortiori* a retrieve of ancient *physis*, coming close to the origin, the *archē*, the source, portends great danger; the terror of the maternal abyss, maternal engulfment. The Sallisian embrace of the doubleness that attends every beginning, on the other hand, seems to rest in an attitude of contemplative attunement to the concealments and unconcealments of *physis*. Of Heraclitus' famous "nature loves to hide" (DK 123) he writes:

Precisely as *φύσις* lets things come to light so as to reveal themselves in their distinct being, it conceals itself, either withholding itself from the very light that it lets illuminate the expanse of things or hiding itself in the very brilliance of that light, shining with such brilliance that, as it instigates visibility as such, it itself borders on invisibility.⁴⁶

And the Heraclitean emphasis on fire as originary element is, too, interpreted by Sallis as bringing light and visibility rather than destructive force: "it is not primarily its power of conflagration but rather its expansive brilliance that enables fire to say *φύσις*."⁴⁷

In the remainder of this paper, then, I would like to shift the terms of the scene away from one in which what remains invisible is identified too closely with an unrepayable debt to the maternal-feminine, and the scorching terror of engulfment that then necessarily accompanies such a return to *physis*—or indeed away from a call for a sexual difference whose terms would only count to two. The complex in which air and the maternal are both forgotten envelopes for Being may be, it seems to me, fruitfully dislodged by a consideration of the manner of *physis*'s

sexual difference as temporary, unjustified, and on the way to being superseded, see Parisi (2010) and Weinstein (2010).

⁴⁵ Irigaray (1999) 96.

⁴⁶ Sallis (2016) 32.

⁴⁷ Sallis (2016) 38.

emergence—becoming as emerging into the light from the shadows, as indelibly and irreducibly *performative*. The sense of performativity I mean to emphasize here is not primarily that of simply doing or acting, but rather that of doing or acting *before another*. Performativity signifies entry on to a stage in which *physis* gives rise not only to beings *qua* actors, but also to the stage itself as the space cleared for spectacle, the scenery, the lighting, the music, and the action and intrigue that takes place between players: the dramas, whether comedic, tragic, melodramatic, or farcical. Recall here Irigaray's profound reading in *Speculum of the Other Woman* of the allegory of the cave-theater in Plato's *Republic* as maternal womb; the gestational space of semblance out of which birth into the open of the true may be possible.⁴⁸ And in concert with this, Irigaray's remarks in "The Power of Discourse" (which, not incidentally, also form the epigraph to Butler's first chapter of *Bodies that Matter*) concerning

the "matter" from which the speaking subject draws nourishment in order to produce itself, to reproduce itself; the *scenography* that makes representation feasible, representation as defined in philosophy, that is, the architectonics of its theatre, its framing in space-time, its geometric organization, its props, its actors, their respective positions, their dialogues, indeed their tragic relations, without overlooking the *mirror*, most often hidden, that allows the logos, the subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself.⁴⁹

Irigaray, here, is offering a critique of the theater of philosophy itself, the theater organized by and for the gaze, the *theōria*, of the subject who finds nothing more than himself and his delusions of domination represented there. And in this patriarchal-paternal imaginary, the maternal womb, as factual, material, literal truth of all our origins, is appropriated and rendered as nothing more than a theater of dissimulation. This mode of the phenomenon as peeled away from the true and concealing it in "mere appearance" or semblance Heidegger calls a *privative* modification.⁵⁰ He writes, "This covering up as 'dissimulation' [*Verstellung*] is the most frequent and the most dangerous kind, because here the possibilities of being deceived and misled are especially pernicious."⁵¹ However, it is this very danger of deception that I want to claim is not simply a constant risk, but indeed a constitutive dimension within nature. What illumination, I want to ask, might then be afforded by understanding *physis* itself according to this dramaturgical topography?

⁴⁸ Irigaray (1985a) 243ff.

⁴⁹ Luce Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," in Irigaray (1985b) 75, original emphasis.

⁵⁰ Heidegger (2010a) 27.

⁵¹ Heidegger (2010a) 34.

The Heideggerian tradition has typically approached a phenomenological conception of Being as *physis* in tones of hushed piety. We might recall the approach of night during Heidegger's conversation on a country path, which "brings near the distances of the stars to one another,"⁵² or Sallis's citing the *Homeric Hymn to Earth Mother of All* as disclosing the "firmgrounded nourisher of everything."⁵³ Both Sallis and Irigaray bring to the scene of *physis* an evocative poetizing, a deep reverence expressed in language bordering on the theological. Sallis, for example, asks,

Who does not have some sense for the sea as its surface sparkles brilliantly under the intense rays of the summer sun; and for the air above (the *aither* as the ancients called it) on days when it superabounds with dazzling, silver light; and for the wind as it is given voice by the swaying pines; and for the dark, rapidly approaching storm clouds and the heavy downpour they will bring; and for the clear night sky of midwinter with its splendid profusion of stars; and for the earth and the forest as once again in early spring they offer their promise of abundance to come?⁵⁴

Who, indeed does not? In a time of ecological devastation, such intense poetic attunements are, in their very refusal of urgency, no doubt intensely urgent and necessary. But I would like to torque this devotional scene by offering a thinking of nature as it is opened up in early Greek thought, precisely in context, as *pharmakon*. We are perhaps all too used to thinking of *technē* as *pharmakon*, but what transpires if we think *physis* in this way? That is to say, a thinking of *physis* as more dangerous, more playful, more performative, more ridiculous, more excessive, more monstrous, than such solemnity would begin to signify.

What this brings to light above all is that nature, too, is surely deceptive, and any "return" to nature must reckon with these inevitable and inescapable dissimulations. Asli Gocer has argued that the *thaumato-poiioi* of the cave, literally "wondermakers" but colloquially puppeteers, represent an equivalent of Aristophanic theater, embodying "the burlesque, the vulgar, fantasy and satire."⁵⁵ Is the cave then Plato's playground of charlatans, or Irigaray's hidden truth of the maternal body? Aristotle observes at the start of the *Metaphysics* that, "All begin . . . by wondering that things should be as they are, e.g. with regard to the wondrous automatons, or the solstices, or the incommensurability of the diagonal of a square."⁵⁶ Such apposition posits a strange equivalence between the wonder-causing capacities of a possibly bawdy mechanical

⁵² Heidegger (2010b) 89.

⁵³ Sallis (2000) 174.

⁵⁴ Sallis (2000) 156.

⁵⁵ Gocer (1999) 121.

⁵⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 983a13–16, trans. H. Tredennick, translation modified.

theatrical performance, a natural phenomenon, and a mathematical puzzle. *Physis* swaggers, embellishes, monstrates, and it, too, is coy and reticent. It shows off, and it hides *as* it shows off. It performs itself to itself, to other aspects of itself, and we, too, observe its many performances. And in part because of its dissimulating tendencies, we in the West have projected upon it a feminine principle, to be sharply distinguished from the direct and fully unconcealed standard of masculine philosophic verifiability and truth.

Inflecting the analysis toward a phenomenological performativity, and away from the classical gendered trope of nature as veiled, here, we are afforded some distance from the deadly beguiling of a feminine lure or seduction. Such seductions may indeed prove fatal to the careless traveler who does not have the proper counterspell, thus providing the ground for millennia of patriarchal misogyny and successive ravagements of the natural world. Instead, we find a nature that manifests itself in the outrageous campery of foliage and plumage, in the exorbitant displays of mating peacock spiders and colobus monkeys, in the spectacularity of the northern lights and massive geological formations of the great continents, and in the earthquakes and tsunamis that ravage the unconscionably inadequate built environments of the global south. The things of nature love to hide and to dissimulate, whether stalking predator or scaredy cat, the stick insect, the famously deceptive orchid, the mysterious underearth mycological networks that resist definite determination, the spores that are said to survive even in the inhospitable conditions of space, and the ghostly traces of subatomic particles such as the Higgs boson. Non-human entities continually play hide and seek, withdraw and manifest, to and with one another, and to and with us, in a dynamic that I suggest must be apprehended less as seriously gendered or obeying any reproductive imperative (despite the Darwinian analyses of sexual selection Grosz's work has helpfully brought to our attention).⁵⁷ Rather, they are playfully, dangerously queer.

⁵⁷ Grosz (2011). Biologists such as Bruce Bagemihl in *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (Bagemihl (1999)), and Joan Roughgarden in *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Roughgarden (2004)), have amassed troves of data and examples illustrating the diversity of animal sexual behaviors, and argue that nonreproductive, homosexual, or interspecies sexual displays and behaviors are less the anomalies they have been traditionally assumed to be, standing in need of exceptional explanation, but are overwhelmingly the norm throughout the natural world. I am indebted to a masterful paper by Sarah K. Hansen, "Biology as Refuge: Cis Fragility and the Biopolitics of Gender," presented at the October 2016 meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Salt Lake City, Utah for alerting me to the breadth of this literature.

Irigaray's epigraph in *Forgetting of Air* is seventeenth-century mystic and poet Angelus Silesius's famous line, "The rose is without 'why'; it flowers because it flowers."⁵⁸ Such blooming of this admittedly overdetermined flower, without reference to any given frame or vision, takes us far from the scene of a Butlerian performativity in which recognition within the sedimented terms of a hegemonic matrix is empowered with granting legibility, legitimacy, and ontological status. Irigaray herself comments:

[Men's] destiny require[s] that they ceaselessly observe that which forms, informs, and surrounds them. That they ceaselessly be in search of reasons, including on the subject of the rose and its secret . . . As for the rose, it would have no need for this. Since its need is to flower. And its very flowering requires no design [*tracé ouvrant*]⁵⁹—a simple spontaneous blooming/unconcealment. Visible with the unclosing of the rose's gathering [*son recueil*], an exposition with no preliminary objective or lens. With no a priori frame that would produce this flowering as such. With no project that might will it so.⁵⁹

And yet, without wanting to reduce the rose to "reasons," that is, to ontogenic and phylogenetic accounts, to the mechanics of photosynthesis or cell maintenance, or to reproductive and evolutionary imperatives involving insect vectors, horticulture, genetic modification techniques, and so on, the rose would not produce its extravagantly enfolded efflorescences were it not for its being-seen, being-smelled, being-sensed, for its emerging as *physis* onto a scene constituted in the first instance and primarily by *physis*. Even in its unconcerned, vegetal repose, the rose would not be at all without the environment now understood as a stage upon which it blooms: its soil, water, the air and the light from which it feeds, the elements in which it takes root and which, as Empedocles insists, also form its roots, an elemental environment that at once shelters it, and to which it is exposed. And the perceptual apparatuses of the world in which it is immersed, and which it impresses—upon which impressions of it are formed—are no less part of the being of the rose than its own senseless, aimless, flowering. As Michael Marder puts it, "the flower is, at the same time, hypersymbolic and nonsignifying, overloaded with and empty of sense."⁶⁰ The rose's lack of a reason, the kind of reason that would satisfy the demands of instrumentality, any relationship to a

⁵⁸ The verse is also considered by Heidegger in his analysis of Leibniz's principle of sufficient reason in his 1955–6 lecture course, *Der Satz Vom Grund*: the "without why" of the rose discloses the groundlessness of its ground; such "without why" is also the concealed ground of human existence. Heidegger (1991). See also Caputo (1986 [1978]), esp. 60–6, and Miller (2002) 182–3.

⁵⁹ Irigaray (1999) 144.

⁶⁰ Marder (2014) 201. See also ch. 12, "Irigaray's Water Lily" (213–29).

determinate end, does not however preclude it from referring irreducibly to an outside, to an array of nature's other efflorescences. Such entities are drawn to it, outraged by its abundant imbrications and coloration, lured by the secrets of its disappearing inner petals and the obscene exposure of its bloom, its heady, delicate scent, in incalculable, ephemeral enjoyment. They may be moved to produce and recite poetry sublime and hackneyed in its name, proffer it as a supplement to their own significations of friendship, love, seduction, or mourning, may hybridize and graft it, dye and dethorn it, emblazon it on a standard or tattoo it upon an ankle, and may dig inside to explore its depths and unwittingly pollinate it, or may simply crunch on its blooms as a tasty snack.

A consideration of this vegetal scene permits a sense of *physis* not only as doubled, as both emerging and simultaneously concealing its ground and being, but as multiplied. After all, *physis* constitutes not only both the figure that appears and the ground for the figure's emergence, but also the clearing or opening that constitutes the distance, or interval, between them.⁶¹ *Physis* thus encompasses the being that stands out from its environment, that ek-statically and monstratively emerges, and the receding environment from which it emerges and with which it might always remerge, *as well as* the open space as the stage upon which such play of light and shadow may take its place. This excessive outstanding is indeed a form of *ekstasis*, though not the Heideggerian *ekstasis* of a *Dasein* that performs the particular doubling within *logos* that is the questioning of Being. It is, rather, an *ekstasis* that plays with nature's inherent attentiveness to or interest in itself, that draws attention beyond an economic circuitry of gains and losses, that—dare one say—entertains, delights, and seduces.

Alphonso Lingis reports biologist Adolf Portmann's claim that there are "organs to be looked at."⁶² Lingis continues: "Before the plumage and display behaviors of the bird-of-paradise, before the coiled horns of the mountain sheep, one has to admit a specific development of the organism to capture another eye."⁶³ And further: "The symmetry of patterns and the colors have to receive a specific explanation on the level of the phenomenal and not of the operational; there is a *logic of ostentation* over

⁶¹ Hill in this volume likewise develops this phenomenological notion of the interval in a feminist frame, but to very different ends, namely in relation to Aristotle's metaphysics of time, rather than in the Heideggerian language of an opening or clearing that is at once a part of *physis* and its condition of possibility.

⁶² Portmann (1967) 111, cited in Lingis (1983) 8. I am grateful to Shannon Winnubst, at a presentation of an earlier version of this paper at the 2015 *philosophia* annual meeting at Emory University, for pointing out the resonance of my analysis with that of Lingis.

⁶³ Lingis (1983) 8.

and beyond camouflage and semantic functions.”⁶⁴ While Lingis here risks reinscribing the reign of the visual, and it is the visual that specifically requires the distance that is the clearing as such, these dynamics also apply to all sensory modalities—touch, scent, sonar, sound, taste, as well as sight; nothing here precludes the combinatory, synaesthetic sensorium of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. However, he is clear that the eye in this context is not the speculative organ of *theōria*, that which seeks to survey, unveil, appropriate, and extract truth. Rather, it is an organ that caresses the surface, whose interest is erotic and excessive, and does not obey in any strict sense a logic of desire indexed to mere lack and satisfaction. Nature’s interest in itself, in itself qua the other that it allows to appear before it, is thus riven and traversed by endlessly circulating, aleatory, nonteleological and thus queer eros. As he describes a descent to the luminescent depths of the ocean, Lingis is by no means insensible to the resonances of a return to the maternal origin, and the fears and desires so awakened in this approach. But instead of a monstrous, engulfing feminine, he attends to the (non-petrifying) medusas, nudibranches, anemones, octopuses, the proliferation of wonders in the deep that lead to a sensation of one’s own body as an assemblage of monstrous organs, whose extraordinary and paradoxical visual diversity in the murky depths cannot be accounted for by any survivalist evolutionary schema.

Sallis himself is distinctively attuned throughout his work to the appearance of the monstrous in Plato, especially insofar as that it is *thaumazein*, wondering, encountering what is wondrous or monstrous, that sets off the philosophical impulse as such.⁶⁵ Furthermore, this monstrous excess is an excess of nature, of nature as figure, of nature as encountered by the philosopher: “Monstrosity as such—as in monstrous wonder—takes place as an exceeding of nature within—or from within—nature.”⁶⁶ Indeed truth itself for Sallis is both monstrous and deformed.⁶⁷ While Sallis then locates such deformation in the philosophical *logos*, it would seem that this propensity for monstrosity operates always already within nature, as nature itself monstrates its wonders, in the depths, far from the gaze and projects of philosophers. If nature constitutes a stage for itself, is constituted by continual acts of self-staging, can it be justified to bring to bear upon it the entire technical weight and apparatus of the theater? This is, after all, the substance of Irigaray’s critique of Plato, in which the maternal body is replaced with the scenography of the cave, and the stage thus set for a narrative of

⁶⁴ Lingis (1983) 9. My emphasis.

⁶⁵ See Sallis’s discussion of Plato, *Theaetetus* 155d at Sallis (2016a) 101–3.

⁶⁶ Sallis (2016a) 136. ⁶⁷ Sallis (1993) 39.

emergence from semblance to truth. And yet nature is surely engaged in a continual dynamics of performance. Bringing to bear the material apparatus of the theater upon the natural world—proscenium, skene, machina, wings, cyclorama, stage, orchestra, spotlights, gels, gobos, upon its movements of shadow, lighting, clearing, showing, make-believe, concealment, inception, dramatic action, and conclusion—would seem to offer an unparalleled kind of illumination of its activities. Early twentieth-century phenomenological conceptions of animal life, such as Jacob von Uexküll's description of the lifeworld of the tick, begin to open up this multiple, dizzying world of natural encounters involving organism and milieu that necessarily encompass a performative element, although Uexküll in particular folds his observations back all too neatly into a Kantian schema of transcendental subjective philosophy.⁶⁸ Roger Caillois's ruminations upon the mimicry of insects—springing from his observation that deceptive adaptations fall far short of conferring an evolutionary advantage as a defense strategy—come close to articulating this sense of excessive, ludic performativity in nature. Instead he concludes that, far from representing an energetic proliferation, such mimetic deceptions display a loss of individuation insofar as the creature merges and blends with its environment.⁶⁹ He thus finds them to represent a kind of letting go, an exhaustion or "psychasthenia"—using a term from Pierre Janet's studies in schizophrenia—a tendency we might gloss (no doubt too quickly) as the operation of a death drive in nature. Contrast this with the most famous of deceptive plants, the orchid, whose vast global diversity and exuberant proliferation would seem to illustrate quite the opposite—indeed the orchid would seem to be the very paradigm of the "abominable mystery" of the flowering plant famously remarked upon by Darwin in a letter to Sir Joseph Hooker in 1879.⁷⁰

Lingis, evoking Nietzsche, describes the theatrical pleasures of disguise, masquerade, and unmasking, and analyzes tragedy not simply in terms of a confluence of Apollonian and Dionysian elements, but as a technology in which the transience of form is rendered visible and ecstatic.⁷¹ In this queer performativity as theatricality of nature, the

⁶⁸ von Uexküll (2010 [1934]).

⁶⁹ Caillois (1984). First published in the surrealist magazine *Minotaure* in 1935, this longer version appeared in Caillois's monograph *Le mythe et l'homme* (Paris, 1938). I am grateful to Carla Freccero, in a lecture entitled "Queer/Animal/Theory: Psychoanalysis and Subjectivity," given to the Department of Performance Studies, New York University, November 2016, for brilliantly laying out this early twentieth-century theoretical terrain and thus demonstrating its relevance for my project.

⁷⁰ I thank Brooke Holmes for reminding me of Darwin's "abominable mystery."

⁷¹ See Lingis (1983) 84–5.

comings to be and passings away of nature are precisely mimicked by the very structure of the theater's *mise en scène*, and the infrastructure of theater comes to metaphorize nature, in such a way that the true and the false, and *physis* and *technē* for that matter, can no longer be properly distinguished. *Mise en scène* as *mise en abyme*...deadly serious and yet unutterably frivolous, *physis* yields the tragedy of the last laugh, and yet another....

In a recent essay, Karen Barad has explored what she calls the “queer performativity” of nature, and within her agential realist approach more generally the concepts of phenomenon and performativity have central importance.⁷² She is explicit, however, that her concept of phenomenon is not that of the phenomenologists. Rather, she is concerned with how entities precipitate out of phenomena, which seem to be for her matrices of entangled and intra-acting agencies in which practices of human knowing, observing, and theorizing as well as material agencies act (this is her performativity), and thus have a constitutive role in producing the objects they observe as well as the knowledge practices that observe them. Phenomena for Barad are “ontologically primitive relations—relations without pre-existing relata.”⁷³ In this onto-epistemic scenario the phenomenon of observer-dependence in quantum physics is taken as central. And while for her the non-human and material world *acts*, she is less concerned with including non-human nature within performativity's range of applicability than with expanding the strangeness of quantum physics at the atomic level to larger scale phenomena. On her account, queer performativity is constituted by observations of natural phenomena that appear to disobey a classical ontological conception of cause and effect, and she includes in her analysis lightning, stingray neurons, a fish-killing micro-organism, human coincidence, and atoms, surely all strange, wondrous, classical-causation-confounding phenomena. The “queer performativity” she identifies is thus less related to a dynamics of display and concealment within and among the entities of nature as I understand it here, than constituted by empirical results and theoretical speculations that demonstrate a kind of uncanny flouting of laws of nature understood at the macro level, as they have emerged in the primarily Newtonian scientific paradigm of modernity. Her reliance on one model within contemporary physics (and there are of course competing ones) thus falls prey to what Sallis calls “compositionism”—a reductive ontological approach that breaks nature down into proposed parts and seeks to show how those parts come to constitute what is

⁷² Barad (2012) and Barad (2007).

⁷³ Barad (2007) 139.

observed. This is quite at odds with a phenomenology of what appears, or what “comes into manifestation.” Despite her claim that she is providing an empirical support for Derridean *différance*, her quantum physics vocabulary of entanglement, intra-action, differentiation, and enfolded materialization aspires to a kind of orthodox scientific correctness in which the goal appears to differ not at all from the traditional one of science, which I have characterized as the lure of nature, that of uncovering nature’s secrets once and for all. Indeed, her theoretical exposition conforms to the formal requirements of the “view from nowhere,” which the content would seem to push against, or more strictly render impossible. Here, the phenomenological dimension is entirely elided, a dimension that necessarily exceeds the metaphysics of presence underpinning scientific inquiry insofar as within it absence and presence are constantly implicated in one another. Performativity here loses its dramaturgical resonances, but is understood merely as the sedimentation of iterative practices, acts, or activities that emerge at the conjuncture of the human and non-human.

By contrast, in the phenomenological account of nature’s queer performativity I am developing here, the humanist focus of Butler’s performativity, and the scientific-epistemic focus of Barad’s, which in both cases never required a conscious, volitional subject capable of recognition for its operation, evaporates. Nature’s queer performativity thus understood in relation to ancient *physis* describes how entities expose themselves to and conceal themselves and their grounds from one another in ways that are hubristic, excessive, sublime, monstrous, mysterious, seductive, dangerous, wondrous, and pleasurable. Intra-action or entanglement here is not simply causally constitutive or sensory, but dramaturgic: nature’s drama unfolding on nature’s stage. Violent and vulnerable, playful and serious, truthful and deceptive, comedic and tragic, nature’s exorbitant appearing and concealing moves away too from a Groszian-Spinozist renaturalization of politics as an increase of power and pleasure, as it attends to and values not simply the expansive vector, but also the contractive, the hidden. It attends to the kind of grounds that recede, hitherto unnoticed and unmourned: air, maternal body, the roots, the conditions of openness that withdraw into obscurity so that the entities they nourish might live. An Irigarayan understanding of sexual difference that demands acknowledging the mother not simply as locus of endless, unpayable debt or abyssal terror, but as a sexuante, sexually other being is indispensable here, and yet nature’s queerness also torques the seriousness of gender, making of it something elusive, mobile, excessively demonstrative, as so powerfully theorized in *Gender Trouble*’s consideration of drag. Gender, sexual difference, sexuality is, like *physis*,

a site of both utmost gravity and utmost levity. What, then, is the task of humans in relation to such a nature? As Homer tells us of the Moly plant's nature, it is hard for mortals to dig. It is not for us to lay bare, nor master, but neither to pay only reverent obeisance. It is to be knowingly beguiled and fascinated by its lures and powers, to read its pharmacological signs with care and even with guile, to respond sensitively, with attunement, wonder, terror, horror, awe, hilarity, credulity, suspicion, flexibility, and play: endless incredulousness and endless responsibility.⁷⁴

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⁷⁴ It will not have escaped the attentive reader that the natural world is acting in ways that are far from amusing at the present time, a situation that demands urgent redress. Growth (*physis*) as natural phenomenon, untempered by withdrawal, is patently misapplied when reformulated as an imperative within the human sphere of economics.

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