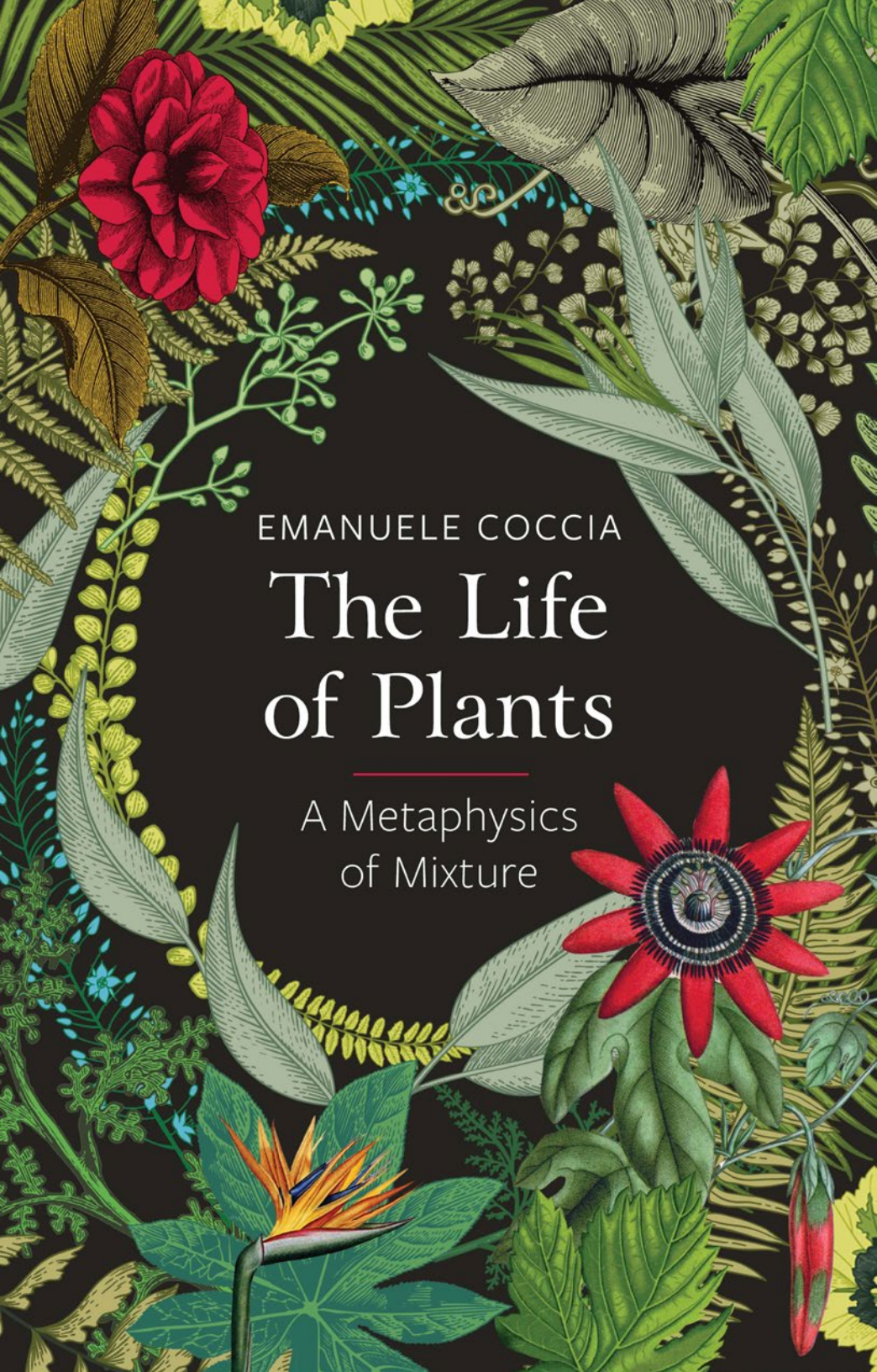

EMANUELE COCCIA

The Life of Plants

A Metaphysics of Mixture

The Life of Plants

The Life of Plants

A Metaphysics of Mixture

Emanuele Coccia

Translated by Dylan J. Montanari

polity

First published in French as *La vie des plantes. Une métaphysique du mélange*
© Éditions Payot & Rivages, 2017

This English edition © Polity Press, 2019

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3152-3
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3153-0 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Coccia, Emanuele, author.
Title: The life of plants : a metaphysics of mixture / Emanuele Coccia.
Other titles: Vie des plantes. English
Description: Medford, MA : Polity, 2018. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018019594 (print) | LCCN 2018035025 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509531554 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509531523 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509531530 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Plants (Philosophy) | Philosophy of nature. | Ontology.
Classification: LCC B105.P535 (ebook) | LCC B105.P535 C6313 2018 (print) | DDC 113/.8--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018019594

Typeset in 11 on 14 pt Sabon by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Clays Ltd, Elcograph S.p.A.

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Matteo Coccia (1976–2001)
in memoriam

Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Author's Preface xi

I Prologue

1 On Plants, or the Origin of Our World 3
2 The Extension of the Domain of Life 7
3 On Plants, or the Life of the Spirit 12
4 Toward a Philosophy of Nature 17

II Leaf Theory: The Atmosphere of the World

5 Leaves 25
6 *Tiktaalik roseae* 29
7 In Open Air: Ontology of the Atmosphere 35
8 The Breath of the World 54
9 Everything Is in Everything 66

III Theory of the Root: The Life of the Stars

10 Roots 77
11 The Deepest Are the Stars 86

IV Theory of the Flower: The Reason of Forms

12 Flowers 99
13 Reason Is Sex 105

V Epilogue

14 On Speculative Autotrophy 113
15 Like an Atmosphere 119

Notes 123

Acknowledgments

I had the idea for this book during a visit to the temple of Fushimi Inari in Kyoto in March 2009, with Davide Stimilli and Shinobu Iso. But I had to wait for a year-long visit to Columbia University's Italian Academy for Advanced Studies to bring it to fruition and to find the time necessary to draft it.

I would like to thank David Freedberg and Barbara Faedda, who warmly welcomed me and, with attention and friendship, made possible numerous human and scientific exchanges. Nothing would have been possible without conversations with and daily support from Fabian Ludueña Romandini. Caterina Zanfi played a major role in the genesis of this book: I thank her greatly. To Guido Giglioni I owe the discovery of the long naturalist tradition during the Renaissance and the early modern period. Nora Philippe read, reread, and commented on a preliminary version of the manuscript; her criticisms and suggestions have been crucial.

The conversations between Paris and New York, with Frédérique Aît-Touati, Emmanuel Alloa, Marcello

Barison, Chiara Bottici, Cammy Brothers, Barbara Carnevali, Dorothée Charles, Emanuele Clarizio, Michela Coccia, Emanuele Dattilo, Chiara Franceschini, Daniela Gandorfer, Peter Goodrich, Donatien Grau, Camille Henrot, Noreen Khawaja, Alice Leroy, Henriette Michaud, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Christine Rebet, Olivier Souchard, Michele Spanò, Justin Steinberg, Peter Szendy, and Lucas Zwirner, have been essential. Lidia Breda supported and accompanied this project from the start, with a friendship and force that only she is capable of; I thank her ever so much. Finally, I thank Renaud Paquette, who erased the signs of stammering from my French and allowed the manuscript to come into its own.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my twin brother Matteo: it is with him by my side that I began to breathe.

Author's Preface

From the age of fourteen to the age of nineteen, I was a student in an agricultural high school in a small isolated town in the farmland of central Italy. I was there to learn "a real job." So, instead of devoting myself to the study of classical languages, literature, history, and mathematics, like all of my friends, I spent my adolescence immersed in books on botany, plant pathology, agricultural chemistry, market gardens, and entomology. Plants, with their needs and illnesses, were the privileged objects of all study that took place in this school. This daily and prolonged exposure to beings that were initially so far away from me left a permanent mark on my perspective on the world. This book is the attempt to revive the ideas produced by those five years spent contemplating their nature, their silence, and their apparent indifference to everything we call "culture."

It is therefore manifest that there is but one substance, not only of all bodies, but also of all souls, and that substance is nothing other than God himself. The substance from which all bodies are made is called matter; the substance from which all souls are made is called reason or mind. Therefore it is manifest that God is the reason of all souls and the matter of all bodies.

David de Dinant

This is a blue planet, but it is a green world.

Karl J. Niklas

I

Prologue

1
On Plants, or the Origin of Our World

We barely speak of them and their name escapes us. Philosophy has always overlooked them, more out of contempt than out of neglect.[1] They are the cosmic ornament, the inessential and multicolored accident that reigns in the margins of the cognitive field. The contemporary metropolis views them as superfluous trinkets of urban decoration. Outside the city walls, they are hosts—weeds—or objects of mass production. Plants are the always open wound of the metaphysical snobbery that defines our culture. The return of the repressed, of which we must rid ourselves in order to consider ourselves as "different": rational humans, spiritual beings. They are the cosmic tumor of humanism, the waste that the absolute spirit can't quite manage to eliminate. The life sciences have neglected them, too.* "Current biology, conceived of on the basis of our

* Translator's note: Unless otherwise specified, all the translations of quotations (French or otherwise) have been made by the book's translator, Dylan J. Montanari, from Coccia's French original. Material in square brackets has also been added by the translator.

knowledge of animals, pays no attention to plants"—"the standard evolutionary literature is zoocentric."[2] And biology manuals approach plants "in bad faith," "as decorations on the tree of life, rather than as the forms that have allowed the tree itself to survive and grow."[3]

The problem is not just one of epistemological deficiency: "as animals, we identify much more immediately with other animals than with plants."[4] In this spirit, scientists, radical ecology, and civil society have fought for decades for the liberation of animals;[5] and affirming the separation between human and animal (the anthropological machine of which philosophy speaks)[6] has become commonplace in the intellectual world. By contrast, it seems that no one ever wanted to question the superiority of animal life over plant life and the rights of life and death of the former over those of the latter. A form of life without personality and without dignity, it does not seem to deserve any spontaneous empathy, or the exercise of a moralism that higher living beings are capable of eliciting.[7] Our animal chauvinism[8] refuses to go beyond "an animal language that does not lend itself to a relation to plant truth."[9] In a sense, antispecies animalism is just another form of anthropocentrism and a kind of internalized Darwinism: it extends human narcissism to the animal realm.

Plants are untouched by this prolonged negligence: they affect a sovereign indifference toward the human world, the culture of civilizations, the succession of domains and ages. Plants seem absent, as though lost in a long, deaf, chemical dream. They don't have senses, but they are far from being shut in on themselves: no other being adheres to the world that surrounds it more