

Phytopoetics: Upending the Passive Paradigm with Vegetal Violence and Eroticism

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Abstract

This article develops the notion of phytopoetics, which describes the role of plant agency in literary creations and the cultural imaginary. In order to show how plants prompt poetic productions, the article engages with narratives by modernist German authors Oskar Panizza, Hanns Heinz Ewers, and Alfred Döblin that feature vegetal eroticism and violence. By close reading these texts and their contexts, the article maps the role of plant agency in the co-constitution of a cultural imaginary of the vegetal that results in literary works as well as societal consequences.

In this article, I propose the notion of phytopoetics (*phyto* = relating to or derived from plants, and *poiesis* = creative production or making), parallel to the concept of zoopoetics.¹ Just as zoopoetics describes the role of animals in the creation of texts and language, phytopoetics entails both a poetic engagement with plants in literature and moments in which plants take on literary or cultural agency themselves (see Moe's [2014] emphasis on agency in zoopoetics, and Marder, 2018). In this understanding, phytopoetics encompasses instances in which plants participate in the production of texts as "material-semiotic nodes or knots" (Haraway, 2008, p. 4) that are neither *just* metaphor, nor *just* plant (see Driscoll & Hoffmann, 2018, p. 4 and pp. 6-7). Such phytopoetic effects manifest in the cultural imagination more broadly.² While most phytopoetic texts are literary, plant behavior has also prompted other kinds of writing, such as scientific or legal

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documents, which bear witness to the immense impact of vegetal bodies on the human cultural, social, and political spheres. These effects contradict traditional human (mis)conceptions of plants as passive and static organisms without agency, and the creative imagination of arts and literature expands actual plant agency with fictional kinds.

Depictions of vegetal agency have not been confined to the page or the canvas, but arise from and translate back into human culture. Phytopoetic emergences occur particularly in moments when the imagination surrounding plants becomes a socially significant factor, such as in the context of art nouveau imagery and writing that attributed sensual, erotic qualities to plants around 1900. As I will show in the first part of this article, this association of plants and sexuality led to institutional fears of vegetal eroticism, which resulted in several decades of literary and curricular censorship of plant reproduction in Germany, ultimately prohibiting the teaching of rudimentary botany in schools. While this ban did little to conceal the knowledge that was readily available on every field and windowsill, it spurred the production of literary texts that mocked these botanical anxieties, and it demonstrates the power of plants to impact the human sphere. As agents of cultural change and the central subjects of literary texts, vegetal life forms engage in phytopoetics, which this article shows with the help of several modernist German narratives.

While the notion of vegetal eroticism locates a threat in the sensually charged parallels between the vegetal and the human in the context of the emergence of early sexology, the period around 1900 also saw the beginnings of science fiction writing that foresaw the destruction of the natural world we are experiencing now in the Anthropocene. The second part of the article discusses these future-oriented phytopoetics in a sci-fi novel featuring monstrous plants. Arising from under the melting ice sheet of Greenland, they infect everyone with suffocating organic growths, thus reversing the vegetal role of supplying oxygen. This case of violent vegetal agency is still unfolding its phytopoetic potential in the future it describes, which we are beginning to see in increasing awareness and contemporaneous changes to laws, policies, norms, and attitudes toward the environment around the world. That is, the melting ice sheets and environmental upheaval in this one-hundred-year-old phytopoetic novel are central to today's political and societal discourse. Transferring human notions about sexuality and violence—about making life and ending it—onto the vegetal realm thus not only upends the paradigm of plant passivity, but it also shows that phytopoetics engages with some of the most central anxieties of modern society, since the sustained survival of the human species depends on plants.

Vegetal Eroticism

Written by German author Oskar Panizza in 1891, the narrative “The Crime in Tavistock-Square”³ satirizes a collective concern with vegetal eroticism in the late nineteenth century. At the time, plants had emerged from their place in the background to some degree, since they were a focal feature of sensual art nouveau aesthetics, played an important role in Darwinian discoveries, and received attention in the context of various back-to-nature movements (Williams, 2007); yet as Panizza’s narrative shows, they were also considered a danger to morality. In the story, a young English policeman reports a disturbing discovery to his superiors. After several pages of stuttering hesitation, he finally finds the words to describe what he encountered during his night shift:

“*Sir*, — it was gruesome; it was a crime against nature; I stood rooted to the ground; I couldn’t help myself!” [...] “There was touching, *Sir*,” — the policeman said and took a deep breath, — “as it is not allowed in the face of God and the world, there was fondling, denuding, discharging, there was giggling, grinding, emitting, entwining, a kind of kissing kissing, *Sir*, — ...” [...] — “*Sir*,” — the young fanatical policeman cried out and sobbed, — “the roses and magnolias in *Tavistock Parc* were practicing *self-maculation*; — it was veritable *plant-onanism!*” (Panizza, 1891/1981, p. 166-167)⁴

The policeman concludes that he has seen plants masturbating. His description blurs the specifics of species by equating the spilling of seeds by humans and plants, though for the latter, this is a reproductive act and not a pleasure-oriented moral taboo as it is for the former in the nineteenth century (Laqueur, 2003). In contrast to the active, anthropomorphically described plants, the policeman becomes plantlike in this passage, as he is passively “rooted to the ground.” The inexperienced young man is only able to identify the behavior as masturbation because it reminds him of “movements like policemen often make them on their cots at night” (Panizza, 1891/1981, p. 166), which implicates his colleagues in a behavior society condemns. If representatives of the law and plants are engaging in the illicit act of autoeroticism, the text suggests, masturbation must be “natural,” rather than a “crime against nature” as the policeman had called it. If, however, it is not natural, as nineteenth-century morality would contend, then these plants, and by extension nature, are unnatural. Faced with this conundrum, the police chief sends the young policeman to the insane asylum and thereby declares the idea of plant masturbation madness.

This decision suggests that it is important to conserve plants such as roses, which the police chief calls “the chastest flowers” (Panizza, 1891/1981, p. 168), as an innocent symbol of love, rather than individual, active life forms that engage in sexual activity. The plants in this narrative break with the symbolic conventions that are traditionally attributed to plants, and by extension, they undermine the gendered stereotypes that have been associated with them. Flowers, and specifically roses, are usually conceived of as feminine (even grammatically as *die Blume* and *die Rose* in German), and the lethal act of plucking them is tied to the idea of “deflowering” a female virgin.⁵ In the Western tradition, plant symbolism has been imbued with gendered eroticism of this kind since long before the turn of the twentieth century, and it contributes to the conception and therefore treatment of plants, especially their flowers, as passive, receptive, ornamental objects of aesthetic pleasure.⁶ In contrast, the acknowledgement of plants as sexually active creatures in this story, despite satirical exaggeration, showcases their phytopoetic agency in various ways: on the level of the text, plants move from the margins to the center of attention. They force the policeman to come up with descriptions that fit their behavior, which takes up several pages of the story, during which the policeman exclaims with frustration, “*Sir*, the English language is not enough to contain this abomination!” (“ist nicht ausreichend um die Scheußlichkeit zu umfassen!”) (Panizza, 1891/1981, p. 166). The verb *umfassen* in the original means that the English language does not contain the right words to describe the act, yet it also implies that language cannot control it. At the same time, *umfassen* is also an act of touching (*anfassen*) or embracing (*umarmen*) that is reminiscent of the flowers’ sensual entwining that the policeman described. Beyond their effect on language and narration, the plants’ activities bring about the policeman’s institutionalization, which is preceded by a small breakdown of the police chief himself. These two occurrences of “madness” show that a change in expected vegetal behavior upsets the socially conforming worldview represented by the police to such an extent that its guiding norms are momentarily unsettled, until the unexpected event is institutionalized—that is, given its place in the normative system, by declaring it madness. On the meta-textual level, plants have prompted the creation of a literary work with creative new expressions and ideas, and here too, the person verbalizing their behavior is institutionalized: the author Panizza and his text were censored immediately, and since the censorship agency of the time were the police, life repeated literature (Jacobs, 2015; Stark, 2009). The imagination spurred by plants had thus produced a set of entangled literary and real-world phytopoetic effects.

The narrative “The Petition,” written by German author Hanns Heinz Ewers in 1904, takes up similar anxieties about vegetal eroticism and shows that Panizza’s

case is neither singular, nor limited to the nineteenth century. The main part of the story poses as a petition written by a young priest, who has been tasked with school inspections. As a result, he asks to ban the teaching of botany because it is, in his words, a “*danger to morality*” (Ewers, 1904/1919, p. 117). He considers the knowledge of plant reproduction dangerous because it puts ideas about sexuality into young people’s heads, including some that involve non-heteronormative notions and suggest an absence of matrimony or monogamy:

Under the guidance of the teachers,...the young souls are forced to study the sexual life of plants in the smallest detail. Without batting an eye, the teacher leads the pure minds into a hotbed of sin, to a Sodom of the most egregious perversions. The entire instruction of botany is solely tailored to the observation of the disgusting practice of [the plants’] sexual functions!...Instead of sinking into the ground with embarrassment, the teacher explains to them with cynical candor how the plants conduct sometimes autogamy [self-fertilization] and sometimes allogamy [cross-fertilization]. He meticulously explains to the innocent boys and girls how the flower attracts insects with its color and scent, how they crawl into the flower to nibble the honey that the flower offers them as a kind of reward for their pandering activity. He explains to them how the bugs, bees, bumblebees, after they have smeared themselves in one blossom with the male pollen, now fly on to the next blossom to wipe off the disgusting powder on the female pistil there and pollinate it this way! Truly, even in a brothel you could not entertain more abominable conversations! (Ewers, 1904/1919, pp. 118-119)

Similar to the young policeman’s description of plant masturbation, plant behavior is encoded in human terms of sexuality and morality in this botany lesson. The reproductive focus of pollination is rendered as erotic pleasure and moral aberrance, which maps the scientifically accurate vocabulary of the biological explanation onto a moral framework. Within this Christian, monogamous concept, plants are painted as active agents who attract multiple pollinators and as independent reproducers who do not conform to a binary, heteronormative model of human sexuality that expects them to be coy, modest, and docile.⁷ Once again, gendered parallels emerge, which show both male and female plants engaged in interspecies sex work, trading pollen with insects.

The language of these scenes is called an “abominable conversation,” as if discussing sexuality were just as amoral as engaging in it. This idea corresponds to the context of literary censorship: the role of the police as literary censors conflated actual and imagined transgressions by persecuting the description of

sexual acts as zealously as their realization. In his “repressive hypothesis,” Foucault suggests that the regulation of physical acts was, in fact, historically of lesser importance than the censoring of sexuality from public discourse: “As if in order to gain mastery over [sexuality] in reality, it had first been necessary to subjugate it at the level of language, control its free circulation in speech, expunge it from the things that were said, and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present” (1976/1988, p. 18). The concerned priest seems to realize the danger of words, and this also suggests that phytopoetic texts are more threatening than actual plants, making phytopoetics an empowering multispecies event (see also Moe, 2014, p. 24). The correlation of power and language is likewise clear to the commissioner reading the petition, who comments at the end of the story. He says, “the man will either be committed to the insane asylum...or he will become Bavarian minister of education one day” (Ewers, 1904/1919, p. 124). Just as with the policeman in Panizza’s tale, the solution to this unsettling display of vivid vegetal sexuality is the institutionalization of the person who dared to put it into words (which extends to the censored authors). Alternatively, the aberrant knowledge would be incorporated into the institution (another form of institutionalization) by officially prohibiting botany as a deviant science, which the priest would do in the role of Bavarian minister of education. By equating the role of education minister with being a candidate for the asylum, Ewers’s satire targets curricular in addition to literary censorship. The text associates censorship agencies with the “madness” they try to contain, just as Panizza’s narrative had done with the masturbating policemen. Both narratives suggest that censorship is a mad institutional practice that struggles to uphold “insane” laws and norms.

The commissioner’s verdict is not far from reality because biological sciences were prohibited almost entirely in the secondary schools of the German Empire between 1882 and 1908 (Sommerer, 2014). Rudimentary botany and zoology were taught in lower grades, but lessons that involved the entire ecological system or evolutionary theories were banned in the context of the Cultural Struggle (*Kulturkampf*) over secularization, which was a Prussian-led attempt to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church on the German school curriculum, especially in its stronghold Bavaria. With his satirical reference to the Bavarian education minister and a few other allusions to political entities of the day, Ewers’s story addresses this absurd situation directly and simultaneously undermines it by reproducing the prohibited botanical knowledge in the text. The language of Ewers’s “Petition” only mildly exaggerates the historical debates. The priest demands, “*Away with the teaching of botany in schools!*...May it keep the souls of our children, the future of the Bavarian people clean from the fermenting putrefaction that the whole named science has spewed out in a century of

disbelief!" (Ewers, 1904/1919, p. 123-124). Similarly, when trying to convince the actual minister of education, Adalbert Falk, of the danger of anti-Christian teachings, Prussian conservative Wilhelm Joachim von Hammerstein said in the German Reichstag in 1878,

But I have to say that if the teaching of Haeckel's Darwinism is permitted in our schools, if it is allowed to inculcate our adolescent students with materialism, the education authorities are not attending to their duty. Then they will carry the responsibility if a generation arises in our nation whose credo is atheism and nihilism, and whose political orientation is communism. (Sommerer, 2014, The 'ban' section, para. 2)

Among these perceived dangers of materialism in the vein of Darwin and Haeckel (who introduced evolutionary ideas to Germany and coined the term *Ökologie* [ecology]), Ewers's priest and von Hammerstein both fear the "atheism" or "disbelief" of a future generation. Historical hindsight shows that increasing secularization as well as the philosophical and political specters of von Hammerstein's speech would come to pass with or without botany instruction, yet the teaching of evolutionary theory in schools is still a topic of debate in some places today, and the danger of communism and "lost souls" has been repeatedly invoked throughout the twentieth century in the face of perceived threats to morality.

The two narratives satirize anxieties about a rediscovered kinship between humans and other species around 1900, when major advances in the natural sciences continuously chipped away at the conception of man as the apex of creation. Darwin's findings had kindled these fears with a family tree for all animals (including the human kind) and developmental parallels between plants and other species. The emerging disciplines of sexology (Sigusch, 2008; Beachy, 2014) and psychology⁸ expanded the material understanding of humans as biological organisms by exposing the illusion of control over body and mind, specifically one's sexuality, thereby suggesting a similar proximity to animals, which the debates of the Cultural Struggle extended to plants. The human entanglement with and dependence on plant life emerges most clearly in the texts when both police chief and priest express their desire to "eradicate all plants on the entire earth, to destroy these lustful, incestuous, perverse creatures root and branch" (Ewers, 1904/1919, p. 123) in a "new Deluge" (Panizza, 1891/1981, p. 168). Panizza's priest invokes this symbol of violent destruction as a retribution for vegetal transgressions, yet the Biblical Deluge punished human sins while plants survived, and the eradication of plant life that Ewers's police chief imagines would

also result in the extinction of humans, thus demonstrating the power of plants. While the worldview of human beings is upended in these narratives, plants remain unperturbed and showcase their powerful position in this cultural setting, in which they prompt censorship laws, determine school curricula, and inspire literary texts—various forms of phytopoetics.

Vegetal Violence

The idea of vegetal eroticism as an uncontrollable, non-normative life force becomes increasingly entangled with notions of violence and death (like the Deluge) in modernist science fiction writing. The genre draws on a future-oriented phytopoetic imaginary, whose impact on human culture can be traced to the laws and policy changes with which we have been responding to the Anthropocene in recent years. Science fiction around 1900 shows that concern about the planet predates our belated reactions, albeit in different terminology, and its broad temporal scope opens up a rich interpretative context beyond its contemporary time frame. In phytopoetic sci-fi plots, plants frequently inhabit threatening positions that underscore their vital role in sustaining life and contradict their perception as passive and powerless. Such vegetal forces violently undo temporary human techno-dominance over nature in the text I turn to next. The addition of lethal violence to vegetal scenarios of vivid reproduction in this novel suggests that no less than the survival of life on the planet is at stake.

Mountains Seas and Giants is a voluminous sci-fi novel written by Alfred Döblin in the early 1920s that depicts the struggle between technology and nature in the twenty-third to the twenty-eighth century.⁹ The modernist novel frequently sequences words without punctuation, like in its title, which gives the text a particular intensity and linguistic ambiguity. I will omit most of the elaborate plot complications and focus on the description of an attempt to create more inhabitable land by colonizing Greenland. To do so, humans harvest the volcanic energy of Iceland, which they store in so-called tourmaline veils.¹⁰ The energy of these veils exudes a mysterious attraction that affects all living matter and sets the stage for plant agency in the form of both vegetal eroticism and violence. As a result of their intervention in nature and its uncharted powers, humans become first attracted to plants, and in an increasing frenzy of fertility and uncontrolled growth, vegetal matter later incorporates animals and humans with lethal violence into what have become mobile plant bodies.

The attractive agency of plants begins when the tourmaline veils are transported from Iceland to Greenland on ships, which soon have trouble moving because

they become entangled in a web of organic matter, described as a “thick plant mat...swelling shrubs thick as arms, branching boisterously, with inch-long sharp-toothed leaves; growing berries the size of apples that serve them as swim bladders; like heads they raised them” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 422). The plants seem to reach out to the ships, and the crew works day and night to hack away the tendrils. Upon separation, the vegetal matter regrows immediately, and the description of its anthropomorphic anatomy of “arms” and “heads” underscores its forceful agency. The interaction between what is described as “peoples of algae” and “bodies of ships” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 423) eventually tears the ships apart and transforms them into floating “mountains meadows” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 426). The incorporation of the inorganic by the organic chips away at the distinctions between living and non-living matter, while the violent circle of suffocating embrace and destructive removal attempts to reinforce their separation. By merging matter, this text physically entangles vegetal and non-vegetal bodies, which goes beyond the merely conceptual blurring in Panizza’s and Ewers’s narratives. This is a violent becoming-plant-matter, which soon involves also human and vegetal eroticism.

Initially, human bodies on the ships feel the vegetal pull as a “fatigue that was like a compulsion” and leaves them like “opium smokers” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 423)—indeed a plant-induced effect. Humans lose energy until they are unable even to move their facial muscles, and once they have lost control over their bodies, they become sexually attracted to the plant matter:

Yet their insides were sweetly moved; frequently, they looked between the ladders doors through the walls ceilings to the sky, saw landscapes in which trees tumbled, the clouds stretched and stripped, dripping warmly, on their chest, the lips; they licked, swallowed. A violent soon impregnable loving sensation ran through them. The men trembled in the frost of arousal, the women shook themselves, walked quivering slowly. Every limb on them was charged with lust, every movement brought them closer to the erupting delirium. They entwined each other, and when they had intermingled their bodies and let go of each other, they were dissatisfied. They kissed and embraced ropes, rubbed and hit arms and legs, the torso [*Rumpf*, also means hull] on steps. Over board protruded the powerful shafts of algae; them they pulled closer, to them they felt desire. The blissful whimpering, the clueless groaning, fearful moaning of the not-to-be-calmed. (Döblin, 1924/2006, pp. 423-424).

This depiction of vegetal eroticism does not present stereotypical images of fragile, feminine flowers that would align with the passive paradigm of the

“chaste roses”; rather, the “powerful shafts of algae” are phallic and drain power and control from both the inorganic matter of the ships and the living beings around them. The text draws attention to the shared materiality of plants, ships, and people by detailing the ways in which humans try to satisfy their overwhelming desire: neither other humans nor parts of the ship’s architecture can quench it—because this desire “frosts,” rather than “burns,” for unreachable elements like clouds in the sky, landscapes of trees, and algae that do not seem to grant satisfaction. These descriptions reinforce the notion that “nature” (both in the form of plants and sky and in the idea of an overwhelming sex drive) retains the upper hand in this scene, and it also subverts dualist ideas based on the primacy of reason, which undergird notions of human superiority. Humans are all body, all matter, in these encounters, which raises the question of how they differ from the ships, for instance. Yet this is not a monist worldview altogether: their powerlessness differentiates humans from vegetal matter, with which they are not (yet) merging. The passage calls the unrequited erotic desire “violent,” and the human reaction, which seems to include self-inflicted pain, is characterized by fear and unrest. Though it is physical and not merely mental discomfort as in Panizza’s and Ewers’s texts, whose satirical impetus prompts laughter, the uneasy effect of phytopoetics in this novel arguably also reaches beyond the page to the reader.

The new force of vegetal attraction affects not just humans and human-made products, but all aspects of the natural world, which results in the creation of grotesque new entities consisting of entire forests, animals, and earth—with veins and intestines. Early on, one of these hybrid creatures is described as a “plant-animal” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 478), but ultimately the plant matter violently incorporates animals, sometimes growing into them in parasitic ways¹¹ and sometimes killing them: “The animals were pressed together, their juice dripped, mixed with the white one of the snapped stems, sapped leaves” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 485). This pattern is repeated throughout the novel: vegetal attraction leads to material incorporation, a digestive rather than penetrative act with erotic and violent overtones. It nearly always involves “juices” being pumped through bodies, consumed, and digested, whose ambivalence opens up a host of violent and erotic associations from blood and other bodily fluids to sap, saliva, and semen.¹² Vegetal matter becomes increasingly animated and exudes an air of chaotic, violent growth and fertility that showcases a variety of vegetal reproductive strategies, whose excesses suggest a rapid evolutionary arms race:

The debris of grasses broad-leaved trees the palms oleander conifers
were touched by the light. They pulled their neighborhood toward

themselves, it rolled toward them, like a leaf¹³ that curls up under the flame....Into their leaf veins, between a network of nerves, the living soils was sucked. From the leaf veins, the nerves emanated the allure....Leaves rose up from the rock slats like cakes in their pans; wide and thick....Often, they carried away with themselves a ball of soil like an egg yolk, pouches, entire sacks, on strands like umbilical cords and fell down, victims to others, when the yolk sack was empty. Often, bushes threateningly lashed out at each other each like arms, seemed to want to suffocate each other. Then, their branches broke upon touch; they melted into one; together their nutrients flooded into all; a big being rose up. [...Lianas] entangled the foreign leaves with their coils. They were voracious and strict beings. They grew secretly into the trees; those were their placenta. The juice of the earth was predigested for them. While the trees withered under them, they let their flowers hang above them, colorful like flags....The giant ferns that stood like inexhaustible mothers and fathers and conceived....These plants gave birth to living offspring; the seedling developed already on the backside of the strong leaves; its sprouts hung in threads down from the leaves. (Döblin, 1924/2006, pp. 489-490)

This suggestive passage is full of a voracious fruitfulness, consumptive fertility, and ravenous fecundity. The acts of incorporation seem to be both reproductive, bringing forth new life, and nutritive, involving violent death: from the consumed, unfertilized egg yolk to pre-digested earth juice and from the sucking of soil to the rising cake (which resonates with the German word for placenta: *Mutterkuchen* = “mother-cake”), these images of consumption go hand in hand with the violent incorporation that pulls vegetal beings toward one another and signals successful invasion with flag-like blossoms (the plant’s reproductive organs). There is lashing out, suffocating, growing into others to absorb their energy parasitically like an all-consuming flame, and ultimately, “the incessant crashing down of trunks....Some of them were unable to fall; corpses stood right and left; more powerful beings devoured them” (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 490). This landscape of death and necro-cannibalism¹⁴ is filled with an air of violent fertility, the moment of conception and merging into one giant being, and reproductive vocabulary from the human and animal realms (umbilical cords, placenta, live births, mothers and fathers, the evocative yolk sack).¹⁵ This is not a transfer of human morality onto plant reproduction, even if some allegorical language appears; rather, in this onslaught of images, clear distinctions become impossible. What emerges is a forceful drive of matter toward growth and the (re)production of life that borders on the destructive, since many of the fertile attempts are immediately smothered by nearby growths. The atmosphere is flush with life, rising like yeast and

fermenting, to the point that vegetal violence and eroticism become indistinguishable in the frenzy of plant agency.

Soon, plants begin to roam the continent to sustain their voracious existence, and their slimy juices and foamy gelatins accompany them: "Giant trees were wandering there; the soil under them grew with them, swelled, as if it were liquid gelatinous and foamed up around them";¹⁶ they move in a grotesque "zigzag, enclosing nearby trees into themselves, dragging them along with themselves" (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 504). Anyone who is exposed to their vegetal liquids is immediately infected with destructive rapid growth. This rampant vegetal life force means certain death for animals and humans. They immediately lose consciousness, and their organs swell to enormous sizes and strangle them as they are being incorporated into the creatures:

The most gruesome deformations became visible. Baked-together trees, from whose tops protruded long human hair, yet peaked by human heads, dead dreadful house-sized faces of men and women....Potato fields, running dogs, humans got into the wandering sprouting steaming mass. That surged up like a cake, swelled up, fidgeting across the sowed plane, rolled itself forward devastatingly slowly like a mass of lava. And everywhere grew stems and stick-high leaves from the rounding beating mass. The arms legs that protruded from the whirring dark mesh were of flesh and bones, often darkly covered in bark, with toes and fingers that fanned out into leaves. (Döblin, 1924/2006, pp. 502-503)

The focus on matter and materiality turns to a monist notion of "mass" (*Masse*) at this point: a "wandering sprouting steaming mass," "a mass of lava," and a "rounding beating mass." At first, this seems to make the ingredients in this "baked-together" "cake" unidentifiable, but the growth of stems and leaves reveals that the identity of this matter is dominantly vegetal. Even "arms legs...of flesh and bones" become "darkly covered in bark" and "toes and fingers...fanned out into leaves." No longer erotic in tone, this violent becoming-plant-matter is now the fate of all material, including human and nonhuman animals, but also "potato fields," that is, cultivated plant matter. Since the mobile frenzy of vegetal growth originated with primordial plant matter that was exposed by the melted ice sheet, this vegetal life force seems to be intent on devouring centuries of human cultivation. The recurring yeasty (mother) cakes and bubbling liquids suggest a fermenting fecundity that is reminiscent of theories and myths about conception and the origin of life: a primordial soup, out of which emerge all sorts of reproductive and adaptive strategies in order to survive in the evolutionary trial

and error. In the novel, human environmental destruction has triggered a return to this original “chaos,” which (re)generates a dominant nonhuman force that pursues life at all costs. The earth may therefore face a future without the human species, its former dominant destructive force, and the novel’s perspective of deep time, ranging from the origin of life to a distant sci-fi future, reduces human existence to a brief blip.

Conclusion

My pursuit of phytopoetics began with the policing of masturbating plants, went on to promiscuous pollinators, and ended with fermenting fertility and violent incorporation. In these texts around 1900, supposedly passive plants are not only animated and agential protagonists; they also actively participate in the poietic production of a literary and cultural imaginary. Whether it is vegetal eroticism fueled by scientific discoveries such as Darwin’s and the artistic innovations of art nouveau, or violent plants taking over the planet to undo the destructions of human technology in an imagined future, the vegetal appears as a threat to the human way of life because it shows that they share in the same material basis. Humans try to separate themselves conceptually and physically from “nature” because the plants’ seemingly indiscriminate sexual and lethally consumptive behaviors violate normative understandings of morality and “the human.” The characters seem unable to realize that humans *are* “nature” and that their futile attempts at separation will therefore result in their own destruction. Rather than the successful punishment or subdual of plant deviance, the texts showcase phytopoetic power: the violence of institutions, censorship, and colonizers is so broad and indiscriminate that they end up devouring themselves—by institutionalizing their own, such as policemen and priests, by calling for a Deluge that would kill the human species, and by exploiting their environment so that vegetal matter takes to a reproductive race for survival that uses up humans as a source of energy. Phytopoetic literature highlights the power of plants, and these particular narratives reflect modern anxieties about the human relationship with the natural world, the self, and the other in past, present, and future. Encounters with the vegetal prompt new ways of poetic expression and critical reflection that further entangle the cultural and literary with the biological, social, and political spheres.

Notes

¹ “Zoopoetics” was first introduced by Derrida in respect to Kafka’s writing and, following Benjamin’s earlier description of this quality in Kafka, can be understood as a reminder of one’s own forgotten animal body vis-à-vis Derrida’s

carnophallogocentric tradition of disembodied language (see Driscoll & Hoffmann, 2018, pp. 2-3). Driscoll and Hoffmann's lucid portrayal of zoopoetics contends that "animals, more so than other forms of life such as plants, are obviously agential beings...: animals *look at us* in a way that trees and rivers...do not" (2018, p. 5). Research on plant intelligence (Mancuso & Viola, 2015; Pollan, 2013; Gagliano, Ryan, & Vieira, 2017; Vieira, Gagliano, & Ryan, 2015) challenges this vision-centric understanding of agency and shows that the previous lack of knowledge hinges on human "plant blindness" (Wandersee & Schussler, 2001).

² This understanding of phytopoetics goes beyond the integration of vegetal output into the poetic practice of individuals (see Ryan [2017], whose use of the term parallels ecopoetics) by developing a metaphorical life of its own in the cultural imagination. Phytopoetic effects of this kind can become disconnected from actual plants and their expressions, or what Vieira (2015) calls "plant inscription" in her work on phytographia.

³ None of the literary texts cited in this article have been published in English translation. All translations are provided by the article's author.

⁴ The German original is interspersed with italicized English terms (e.g., "*Sir*") to authenticate the story's setting in England, partly in an attempt to avoid censorship, but also because London's Metropolitan Police served as an example to the emerging police forces of Europe (Jacobs, 2015; Stark, 2009).

⁵ For gendering, see Schiebinger (1993) and McLeod (2015). The tradition of "roses as emblems of death and love" goes back to the Greeks (Bynum & Bynum, 2014, p. 200). For sexual violence, see exemplarily Goethe's poem about the "Little Rose on the Heath" (1799), who resists being plucked by stinging a boy with her thorns and is taken violently.

⁶ Consider "the feminist plant" in Gibson & Gagliano (2017) and Bataille's deconstruction of floral beauty via their sexuality (and decay, since the flower "rots indecently in the sun [...and] is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure"): "the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs. Thus the interior of a rose does not at all correspond to its exterior beauty; if one tears off all the corolla's petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft. Other flowers, it is true, present very well-developed and undeniably elegant stamens, but appealing again to common sense, it becomes clear on close examination that this elegance is rather satanic: thus certain kinds of fat orchids, plants so shady that one is tempted to attribute to them the most troubling of human

perversions" (1929/1985, p. 12).

⁷ These concerns are not new, and Ewers's text references Linnaeus, whose eighteenth-century work on vegetal reproduction led to similar moral anxieties (Schiebinger, 1993; Jacobs, 2016).

⁸ Freud famously described the advent of psychology as one of three insults of science against human narcissism: 1) Copernicus's discoveries revealed that "our earth was not the center of the universe," 2) Darwin's "research robbed man of his apparent superiority under special creation, and rebuked him with his descent from the animal kingdom, and his ineradicable animal nature," and 3) "psychological research, which wants to prove to the 'I' that it is not even master in its own home, but is dependent upon the most scanty information concerning all that goes on unconsciously in its psychic life" (1915/1920, pp. 246-247).

⁹ Döblin is most famous for *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929), whereas this earlier novel, which reflects the contrast between the technologically intensified violence of World War I and contemporaneous back-to-nature movements, was unsuccessful. His narrative "The Murder of a Buttercup" (1913) also takes up the topics of vegetal eroticism and violence, with a gendered emphasis on the latter.

¹⁰ Tourmaline is a gemstone that consists of several different minerals and comes in a variety of colors. "Put under a pressure or temperature change, it will generate an electrical charge" ("The Tourmaline Mineral Group," n.d.).

¹¹ "Squids, monstrous bodies, with many arms, had their eyes closed. The muscle-strong mantle kept still, was tautly swollen, the plant tissue had driven its extensions into its cavity, it had grown around the big veins, the animal was not dead. Its heart was beating; the hollow parts of the plants discharged into its intestines; the heart sluggishly pushed the juice toward other animals, other plants" (Döblin 1924/2006, p. 486).

¹² Panizza's notion of spilled seed returns: "The testicles of the men merged with treetops and blossoms; they poured their juice into the round bodies that they carried like berries. Under the overabundance of the juices, one frequently saw the giants bend, moan and spill their seed" (Döblin, 1924/2006, p. 518).

¹³ The word *Blatt* in the German original means both leaf and page, which highlights the material, metaphorical, and phytopoetic connections between plants and writing.

¹⁴ Cannibalism “is the place where desire and dread, love and aggression meet [...and it] involves both the establishing of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the dissolution of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one” (Kilgour, 1998, p. 240). In contrast to phallic penetration, violent incorporation could be considered a form of female agency.

¹⁵ Most kinds of plant pollination involve sperm and egg. Only fungal reproduction approximates the idea of merging bodies that the branches engage in here (Haskell, 2012, pp. 133-134).

¹⁶ Despite the text’s sci-fi creativity, Döblin’s novel also reproduces biological knowledge: The “gelatinous sheath of food around tree roots creates a buzz of biological activity [...and] much of the soil’s life is crowded into the...rhizosphere...the living soup” (Haskell, 2012, p. 225).

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