

What We Think About When We Think About Triffids: The Monstrous Vegetal in Post-war British Science Fiction

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In the face of continuing post-war reconstruction and the rising tide of urbanization, British science fiction writers such as John Wyndham (a pseudonym for John Beynon Harris) and John Christopher (Sam Youd) portrayed post-apocalyptic scenarios in which the vegetal directly determines the fate of human civilization. By destabilizing the relationship between plant and human, Wyndham and Christopher open up a space to reconsider the vegetal as a distinct life form itself, beyond its instrumental use-value, or as an anthropomorphized reflection of human thought. Although plant life is traditionally defined by its inability to move or to speak, both writers suggest that communication bound to the visual or oral is highly limited (for instance, human sight is confined to a limited spectrum). In Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) plants become mobile and seemingly sentient, in the process becoming an invasive presence that exposes and challenges the limits of anthropocentric thought. By contrast, in Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956), the absence of the vegetal renders manifest the subaltern status of plant life, while suggesting

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that plants are able to communicate through their materiality and posture. Both texts signal that what is conventionally understood as Other is actually a blank repository that ventriloquizes humans' unconscious desire. Following the population's sudden loss of sight in *The Day of the Triffids*, the characters begin to project their own thoughts and emotions onto the triffids, which highlights the indeterminate limits of anthropomorphic representation. *The Death of Grass* demonstrates that such anthropocentrism constitutes an act of metaphysical violence that, at the same time, under-imagines plant life and installs specialist terminology and botanical classification as a substitute. Presenting the relationship between plant life and human life as a contested space, these texts manifest the problem of anthropocentric certainties and the absolute alterity of plant-thought.

The two novels under discussion represent plant life from diametrically opposed viewpoints—namely, in terms of dramatic growth and decay—that each nevertheless results in the collapse of civilized norms. In *The Day of the Triffids*, the last survivors of British society find themselves prey to the titular plants and come to question the boundary between the plant and the human. Meanwhile, in *The Death of Grass*, a virus that destroys grass, a seemingly insignificant aspect of life, leads to the disintegration of human society. In both novels, plant life prior to the catastrophe is presented as a quotidian accompaniment to human life that is consequently invisible and, for the most part, little remarked upon. Following the blinding of the human race by what are implied to be satellites bearing biological and chemical weapons, *The Day of the Triffids* reconfigures plants as monstrous predators, while the mass-destruction of plant life in *The Death of Grass* is a catalyst for monstrous behavior among humans. By imagining the collapse of Western civilization, these science fiction novels expose its constitutive elements. At the same time, the focus on representations of vegetal life as alternately a monstrous presence or debilitating absence demonstrates the limitations and insufficiencies of metaphysical thought. In this respect, the alternative ontology to be discovered within the vegetal is a manifestation of the unconscious, typically understood as a form of non-thought that silently inhabits thought. In place of positivist thought, which treats plant life as negligible beyond its instrumental value as fuel or food, these novels suggest that plant life is more closely aligned with the Freudian unconscious that unifies knowledge and non-knowledge, activity and passivity, and is immanent to human thought.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the portrayal of plants in *The Day of the Triffids* as they transgress the boundary between plant and animal.

Through an analysis of the survivors' use of anthropomorphic language, cynical reason, and their self-conscious avowal of the power of habituation, I argue that the attribution of thought to plants in this text signals the necessary limits of anthropomorphism and suggests that plant-thought can only be known through the rejection of metaphysical categories, dialectical thought, and traditional ways of seeing. In the second part, I address the symbiotic relationship between civilization and plant life in *The Death of Grass*. This novel suggests that the vegetal occupies the margins of Western thought and that its mundanity renders it invisible, thereby excluding it from metaphysical considerations. Noting that the alterity of the plant echoes the unknowability of the Freudian unconscious, I argue in this section that the novel offers an appreciation of plant life as *life in itself*, thereby presenting an alternative ontology to instrumentality, which appropriates nature as a collection of resources and raw materials to be managed and consumed by humans. The collapse of human civilization in British post-war science fiction brings to the fore the submerged interdependencies between plant and human in ways that question the complacency of human self-conceptions and test the limits of anthropomorphism.

CONCEPTUALIZING TRIFFID-THOUGHT

Towards the conclusion of *The Day of the Triffids*, the remaining survivors of British society prepare to construct a new civilization on the Isle of Wight, a small island off the south coast of the United Kingdom that is deemed to be defensible against the proliferating vegetal monsters. The triffids are monstrous precisely because they transgress the limitations of plant life, originally defined by the ancient Greek philosophers in negative terms as life without locomotion or perception. The tripod limbs of the triffids, however, endow them with mobility, and their ability to rattle little sticks against their stems gives them the ability to communicate, thereby drawing them closer to the traditional category of the animal. The survivors also attribute a third monstrous attribute to the triffids—namely, the “apparent ability to learn” (Wyndham 2003, p. 200)—and it is this latter feature in particular that promises radically to decenter the survivors' anthropocentric worldview and debunk the assumed superiority of the human intellect. The concept of plant-thought constitutes a challenge to the metaphysical boundary between plant and animal, and, by extension, the philosophical matrix that grants agency (only) to humanity and legitimizes the consumption of natural resources.

In contesting the anthropocentric worldview, the triffids trouble not only the categories of plant, animal, and human, but also the very notion of categorization itself. The majority of horror novels can be read as a conduit for anxieties concerning the potential of contamination from an alien Other, be it the animal in H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), technology in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), the cosmic in H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos (1928), the demonic in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), or the dead in myriad ghost stories. Wyndham's text does not entirely fit into this schema since it dwells on the absolute alterity of the plant. Whereas transgression of the above categories is plausible and can be said to occur already to varying degrees, the alterity of the plant is such that plant-thought can only be represented through two extremes: either complete absence, or a completely fantastical presence, as seen in the second chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), in which the flowers awaken and discuss Alice's anatomical features using vegetal signifiers such as "petals" to describe her (p. 14). The sequence is clearly demarcated as fantasy, and the plants are rendered as little more than stationary people, which has the effect of reinforcing the division between plant and human. By contrast, the triffids trouble such classifications and appear, instead, as unknowable and alien. In response, the humans tend to anthropomorphize them in an effort to incorporate the creatures into their worldview. Rather than models of *plant* intelligence, then, the triffids serve as projections for *human* imaginings and unconscious desires.

As the survivors contemplate the arduous task of reclaiming Earth from the triffids, they attempt to quantify the "brain power" and man-hours required to devise and manufacture the synthetic hormones that would quell the vegetal menace, but they are ineluctably driven to the conclusion that many, if not all, of their resources will be expended on the mere business of survival. This bleak prospect suggests that the rise of the triffids heralds the dawn of a new dark age, in which the infrastructure and expertise required to generate and disseminate complex specialist knowledge is no longer possible. Whereas the survivors must face the difficulties involved in the creation and circulation of knowledge, the triffids appear to possess a collective intelligence that enables them to learn from the demise of individual plants over time. This is a form of thought that is entirely alien to subject-object relations. As triffid expert Walter Lucknor declares, early in the novel, the triffids possess "an altogether *different* type of intelligence" (Wyndham 2003, p. 35; emphasis added). While many of the survivors

continue to draw upon known metaphysical categories in an attempt to come to terms with a world that has irrevocably changed, the triffids signal a queering of the relationship between plant, animal, and human that constitutes a subversion of received notions of order and knowledge. In eschewing the binaries of subject and object, life and death, interiority and exteriority, the individual and the collective, the triffids occupy the placeless place of the Freudian unconscious.

Faced with the radical indeterminacy of the triffids, the survivors typically fall back upon metaphysical certainties and, like Alice through the looking glass, seek to anthropomorphize the plants, reading them as an invading army. Such an approach constitutes a weak decentering, in which the primacy of the human is simply replaced with that of the plant, rather than a deconstructive approach in which the very relation between center and periphery is dissolved. Following the initial discovery of the triffids, the threat they pose, primarily in the form of their stingers, is swiftly identified and contained. However, the human population is subsequently blinded by a cascade of green light from the skies that is initially assumed to be fragments from a comet burning in the atmosphere but is later strongly implied to be caused by man-made satellites. As with Oedipus, the survivors' literal blindness is echoed by their failure to recognize their own role in shaping their destiny. Reading their self-made destruction as the effect of an external alien presence, the human characters mimic the category error of projecting their own motivations onto the instinctual behavior of the triffids.

In this way, then, the non-thought of the plant is not a form of absence but a presence within its opposite. This formulation presents a relation between plant-thought and the unconscious conceived of as thought that occurs unbeknownst to the subject and that is resistant to representation. Plants and the unconscious initially appear oppositional since they are identified through degrees, respectively, of externality and intimacy. This seeming contradiction is resolved through recourse to Lacan's neologism "extimacy" (*extimité*), which postulates that the most intimate experience is paralleled only by the outermost insofar as both are unknowable to the subject and accordingly function as vessels for unconscious desire (Miller 1994, pp. 74–87). We also witness this antinomic reasoning in plant life, which simultaneously strives upwards through shoots that reach towards the sun while roots drive downwards into the earth. Positioned as a foreign element of non-thought, triffid-thought (and, by extension, plant-thought) is thus structured like the unconscious.

Due to the unknowability of plant-thought, the human survivors ineluctably anthropomorphize the triffids, projecting their own unconscious fears and desires onto them in the process. Since the unconscious can only be known through gaps in perception, eschewing metaphysical binaries of subject and object, life and death, interiority and exteriority, individual and collective, the attribution of human characteristics to otherwise arbitrary and instinctual behavior signals unconscious desire and the limits of anthropocentric thought. Since the horror in Wyndham's novel is predicated upon the implication that the non-human triffids can think and surpass the humans, this interpretation demands that we read the novel against the grain and treat the reader as one who is duped by his or her own cynicism. Throughout the text the characters express disbelief, shock, and skepticism at the notion that plants can think while, at the same time, continually anthropomorphizing the creatures; this double-coding of the triffids paradoxically buttresses the reader's suspension of disbelief and presents a false conception of plant-thought that is really the projection of human self-conceptions and values. When the protagonist, Bill Masen, and his companion, Josella Playton, drive down the London streets, they witness triffids roaming in the wake of a human mob. Playton exclaims: "Did—did you see what that was? They were *driving* them?" (Wyndham 2003, p. 63). In the face of humans reduced to their animalistic instinct, Playton ascribes human motivations to the plants. However, this utterance simply reverses the hierarchy between human and plant, rather than offering a wholesale deconstruction of the notion of a center. Playton's use of the word "driving" signals that language is an irremediably human artefact that, in its communication of human scale, dimensions, interests, and desires, renders the world intelligible as a set of systems of dominance and subjection, activity and passivity, absence and presence.

When we acknowledge the short circuit produced by the spectators' cynicism, the triffids' seemingly planned actions appear more akin to a set of built-in responses to stimuli. In the village of Steeple Honey, a man who had been concealed within a church runs out of the doorway towards the approaching car and is immediately assailed by a lurking triffid. Masen's new companion, Wilfred Coker, expresses incredulity at the sight:

"It was—no, damn it, it can't have been *waiting* for him?" he said. "It must have just happened.... It couldn't have *known* he'd come out of that door.... I mean, it *couldn't*—could it?"

"Or could it? It was a remarkably neat piece of work," I said. (Wyndham 2003, p. 152)

Coker's incredulity paradoxically renders the attribution of intelligence to the plant more believable since his cynicism does the work of the reader's own skepticism, thereby disarming that reader's critical faculties. The characters are cynical, in other words, so that we do not need to be. The logic of cynical reason reaches its apotheosis when Masen contemplates the possibility that triffids can speak, right before claiming that "There's a kind of conspiracy not to believe things about triffids" (p. 153). Rather than directly making the claim that triffids can speak, Masen implies it and thereby creates the illusion that the reader has reached this conclusion on their own. However, such considerations are little more than the projection of human attributes onto plant life, as demonstrated when Masen encounters two more triffids in a field: "I waited until they paused and then decapitated both of them" (p. 153). The use of the word "decapitation" is an act of anthropomorphism since it specifically indexes cutting off a person's head, an anatomical part that triffids conspicuously lack. Plants, indeed, do not possess a center: their leaves, roots, and seeds are a combination of supplementary and superficial elements (Marder 2013, p. 81). Masen's description of the triffids, then, signals the difficulties involved in representing the ontology, capacities, and interests of non-humans—as well as the uncertain limits of anthropomorphism.

The problem with presenting the survivors' anthropomorphism as simply a category error is that this implies that set limits can be attached to the categories of human and plant. As Timothy Clark (2011) states: "Given that all human representations project a human measure of some sort, it soon becomes debatable where 'anthropomorphism' stops.... All human knowledge," Clark continues, "must needs be anthropomorphic in some way" (p. 193). Rather than seeking to set limits to anthropomorphism, *The Day of the Triffids* leaves the question of whether plants think in abeyance and, instead, demonstrates how seemingly inconsequential word choices construct the non-human Other as a familiar reflection of ourselves. Rather than offering plant-thought, the novel tells us what *we* think about when we think about triffids.

Although the novel initially appears to support an anthropomorphic interpretation of the vegetal monsters, on closer examination the triffids' seemingly planned actions are more akin to instinctual responses. For instance, the triffids consistently direct their stings at humans' heads, meaning that children and those who wear helmets frequently escape unscathed. This is not an intelligent assault based on the triffids' knowledge of human weaknesses, since they continue to sting their opponents even

if they are wearing protective gear; instead, this is a response stimulated by external shifts in the environment. Masen notes that it “looked as if the triffids only ambushed in places where there was soft earth for them to dig their roots into while they waited” (Wyndham 2008, p. 188).¹ Although the status of anthropomorphic language is ultimately irresolvable, the most logical conclusion to be drawn from this behavior would be that the triffids seek soft earth so that they can extend their roots and seek nourishment. By contrast, Masen reads the triffids as setting an ambush and waiting, and later presents them as “armed” (p. 62) usurpers of the Earth (Wyndham 2003, pp. 194–195). These descriptions fail to approximate plant-thought but, instead, apply degrees of human logic to the non-human.

The survivors’ adherence to anthropocentric logic causes them to ascribe an autotelic nature to plant life, rather than work to produce an alternative to familiar metaphysics. Throughout the novel Masen, Playton, and others speak in hushed tones when triffids are nearby despite the triffids’ lack of hearing apparatus. Not only does such a gesture imply that the triffids can hear, but their actions also ascribe intelligence and understanding to the plants. When Masen does imagine plant-thought, he does not present an image of radical alterity but offers, instead, a simplistic inversion of human thought: “From a triffid point of view, a city must be much like a desert, so I should think they’ll be moving outward toward the open country on the whole” (Wyndham 2003, p. 91). Masen’s construction of a triffid’s perspective does little more than theorize a reversal of the (human) population shift from the country to the city, reaffirming the validity of the urban-rural binary in the process. Furthermore, Masen deploys instrumentalist logic when he imagines that the city is barren to the triffids and therefore lacking the conditions that would normally sustain plant life. These assumptions about plant-thought display the structure and limitations of dialectics—an oppositional logic blind to the diffuse and the impartial. The ascription of an autotelic nature to the vegetal points to the insufficiency of language in conceptualizing an alternative subject to the human.

The insufficiency of language is a predominant theme in *The Day of the Triffids*, and the novel takes steps to assure readers that it is written in the future following the catastrophe. For instance, reference is made to Elspeth Cary’s fictional history of the colony established by Masen and the other survivors. At the start of the novel, Masen explains in a direct

address to the reader that his narrative will necessarily employ the language of the past (the reader's present) in order to describe his present (the reader's future): "It involves a great deal that has vanished forever, but I can't tell it any other way than by using the words we used to use for those vanished things, so they have to stand" (Wyndham 2003, p. 19). In order to make the world of the triffids intelligible to a contemporary audience, Masen claims that it is necessary to use language reflective of the implied reader's situation, which suggests that Masen's conception of himself and the world has fundamentally changed. As we have seen, however, Masen struggles to present thought beyond the constraints of metaphysics. The question of whether the fault lies with Masen or the linguistic tools he is equipped with remains in abeyance. In this respect, the extended passage in which various members of the population attempt to determine a suitable designation for the triffids—including names ranging from Trichots to Trippets and that draw on the Latin terms for walking or traversing (*ambulans*) and "projections that serve in locomotion" (*pseudopodia*)—once again indicates that language is irremediably anthropocentric (pp. 28–29). In the end, the noun "triffid" serves to fit the plants within existing classificatory systems, rather than reassigning the meaning of words, along with the shifts in scale, perception, and syntax that envisioning plant intelligence would require.

The limitations of language in articulating plant life is further emphasized by intertextual references to Shelley's "Ozymandias" (Wyndham 2003, p. 133), concerned as it is with human hubris in the face of millennia of decay, to Aldous Huxley's and H.G. Wells's dystopian visions (pp. 74, 65), to Byron's "So, we'll go no more a roving" (p. 40), which is concerned with loss and the fatigue of age, to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (p. 130), and to Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" (p. 133), an example of *carpe diem* poetry. Together, these texts repeatedly signal the limits of human endeavor, entropy, contingency, and death. Although these literary allusions are relevant to the novel's themes, they have little bearing on the survivors in the vegetal world of the future when such reminders of hubris and mortality are no longer necessary. Instead, the literary is presented as the language of the past, as a time when cognition was oriented along anthropocentric lines. Although to a contemporary audience the allusions challenge conceptions of the human as dominant, it is a challenge achieved only at the cost of emphasizing literature's redundancy within the alternative future of the triffids.

THE LANDSCAPE SPEAKS

John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* is a post-apocalyptic novel in which a small band of survivors must suspend their suddenly anachronistic moral values and battle other survivors in order to reach a safe zone, in this instance an easily defensible valley held by the brother of the protagonist John Custance. The novel was published by Michael Joseph as part of a series edited by the novelist Clemence Dane entitled "Novels of the Future" (Wolfe 2003, p. 107), and yet it portrays a return to the rural past. Prior to the catastrophe, Custance worked as an engineer as part of the post-war project of reconstruction and urbanization, and the quest to reach his brother's farmstead signals a retreat to the organic community that pre-existed the Industrial Revolution. This retreat is a continuation of the trope established by Wyndham who named his protagonist Bill Masen, one letter removed from the word "mason." In this respect, Wyndham's and Christopher's work constitutes a counter-narrative to the prospect of material prosperity and social opportunity promised by the nation's renewed commitment to and faith in scientific progress, technocracy, bureaucracy, and the rise of the expert in the post-war period. Where they differ is in their approach to the vegetal: Wyndham's novel is concerned with an overabundance of plant life, while Christopher depicts a world in which vegetation is notable for its absence.

Anticipating the concerns that have emerged in the twenty-first century regarding severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Christopher depicts the rapid spread of the Chung-Li virus, which targets grass but not humans or animals. The virus emerges in China before spreading across the rest of the world, and, in scenes that echo the Great Chinese Famine of 1958–1961, which resulted in an estimated number of deaths ranging from fifteen to forty-five million, Custance and his family bear witness as starvation and chaos sweep across East Asia before the virus unexpectedly reaches British shores. In the novel the death rate is estimated by the United Nations to be over two hundred million people (Christopher 2009, p. 18). By comparison, in 1961, the population of China was just over six hundred million and that of the UK approximately fifty million. The novel's allusions to starvation on a global scale graphically illustrate humanity's reliance on vegetal life, which Marder (2013) terms "the most mundane and unobtrusive instance of alterity" (p. 36). Prior to the catastrophe, plants are viewed in instrumental terms as either a resource to be harvested, or as something standing in the way of progress and

development, yet, following the outbreak of the virus, Custance learns that the signifier “grass” or *gramineae* is a homogenizing term that incorporates more than 10,000 domesticated and wild species and constitutes approximately twenty percent of the vegetation covering the Earth (Christopher 2009, p. 23). Whereas *The Day of the Triffids* demonstrates the ineluctable nature of anthropocentricity both in thought and in language, *The Death of Grass* highlights the invisibility, the assumed silence and, consequently, the subaltern status of plant life under the auspices of the Anthropocene.

The moral dilemmas in *The Death of Grass* pivot around the issue of care for “Self” and “Other.” The novel asks what moral norms and forms of kinship can survive under conditions of crisis. While characters repeatedly voice their sympathy for “the poor wretched Chinese” (Christopher 2009, p. 12), they also self-consciously reflect on the limits of their philanthropic impulses, and, once the UK succumbs to the virus, they concede that despite their intentions, the demands of personal survival overrode the moral duty to care for others. When Custance’s wife, Ann, comments on their own capacity for disavowal in the face of suffering—“we can talk and laugh and joke,’ she said, ‘in a land as peaceful and rich as this, while *that* goes on”” (p. 13)—her comments index not only the effects of the fictional Chung-Li virus, but also the reception of stories of starving children reported in the Western media during the novel’s composition. Although Ann and her family are aware of the famine in China and feel compassion for the victims, they feel powerless to change anything and treat the events as a *memento mori* that serves mostly to render them grateful for their own more fortunate circumstances. As Custance later remarks to his friend, Roger Buckley, who works as a Public Relations officer for the Ministry of Production, the subject of repopulating the now-barren lands of Asia has not been broached by either the government or the media. Buckley’s cynical response is that “we try not to think of them too much, don’t we? It’s as though we had managed to chop off the rest of the world, and left just Europe, Africa, Australasia, and the Americas” (p. 37). In this respect, the novel offers a commentary on Occidental responses to human suffering on the world stage. Buckley and other minor characters occasionally make racially insensitive comments and imply that the virus is a result of Communism, or instigated as a form of population control. This stance is sometimes but not always contested by Custance who, himself, becomes increasingly distanced from the suffering of others and eventually shoots his brother in order to claim the valley and secure the safety of his

newly-formed tribe. Consequently, *The Death of Grass* demonstrates the ever-decreasing circle within which a duty of care for the Other is formed, depicting what happens when the politics of pragmatism steadily override moral considerations and the survivors adopt increasingly violent methods to survive.

In posing ethical considerations regarding the limitations of the duty of care for the Other, the novel employs the death of grass as a metaphor for human suffering, although, as I will later suggest, it is possible to reverse the metaphor and read the death of grass with the pathos we would normally reserve for the loss of human life. In Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, the population of the USA is simultaneously unified yet individualized by analogy to grass and soil. As Jerome Loving (1999) notes, the title is a pun: "grass" refers to works of "dubious value" and "leaves" to the pages they are printed on (p. 179). Whitman's poem plays on the notion that "grass" is of lesser value, yet also renders that notion ironically in a manner that informs Christopher's novel. Individual blades of grass are rarely seen as discrete plants; the word "grass" is a mass noun, which suggests that each blade is merely a minor variation on a type. In this respect, *The Death of Grass* implies that the Western response to the famine in China was to regard human lives as a series of indistinguishable blades of grass, submerged in a homogeneous mass. Every signifier carries within it the trace of its opposite, and, in this respect, a country that possesses a landmass broadly equivalent to the USA but with four times the population bears with it not only the trace of the fecundity of life, but also the possibility of death on an unimaginable scale. This perspective is alluded to when Buckley refers to a set of unpublished photographs of central China:

I hadn't understood properly before quite what a clean sweep the virus makes of a place. Automatically, you think of it as leaving *some* grass growing, if only a few tufts here and there. But it doesn't leave anything. It's only the grasses that have gone, of course, but it's surprising to realize what a large amount of territory is covered with grasses of one kind or another. (Christopher 2009, pp. 37–38)

In this passage, the virus is depicted in terms that are reminiscent of the human exploitation of natural resources. It is bestial—"it was able to go ahead and show its teeth" (p. 23)—rendering it closer to human than plant life. Like the human, the Chung-Li virus consumes all forms of grass

in an effort to sustain itself, while Buckley's surprise at the extent to which vegetation covers the land emphasizes the insignificance of the vegetal. In this respect, the novel primarily (but not exclusively) depicts appeals to protect the environment as predicated upon the notion that plant life is a resource subordinate to and serving human civilization, rather than as a life form worth preserving for itself.

Rather than solely a life form in its own right, the grass possesses a double meaning as an analogy for human suffering and starvation. When the novel is situated within its historical context, the wastelands appear analogous to the mass graves of the two world wars, the effects of atomic weaponry, and the outbreaks of famine and disease that assailed humanity over the course of the twentieth century. If we reverse the analogy, though, and view the destruction of plant life with the same emotion that we would treat human life, the sheer impossibility of thinking what that would mean reveals the degree to which plant life is treated not as life, but as mundane matter. The stretches of bare earth, what had once been rich and blooming landscapes, evoke primarily sensations of familiarity: "John looked out at what had been the lawn and was now a patch of brown earth speckled with occasional weeds. Already it had become familiar" (Christopher 2009, p. 41). This familiarity signals the extent to which plant life (and its absence) blurs into the environment, becoming so mundane as to become invisible. The only voice of dissent is that of Custance's brother, who lives off the land and claims that plant life should be recognized as life in itself, independent from human needs and desires: "For years now, we've treated the land as though it were a piggy-bank, to be raided. And the land, after all, is life itself" (p. 41). Meanwhile, for Custance, the significance of the death of grass continues to lie in its catastrophic effects on human civilization; this instrumentalist perspective renders the specificity of the catastrophe opaque. Reading plant death as either a cause of or a metaphor for human death once again returns plant life to its subaltern status as the invisible Other against which humans derive their identity.

Just as the triflids occupy the placeless place of the Freudian unconscious by eschewing metaphysical binaries, the landscape in *The Death of Grass* echoes the unknowability of the unconscious by occupying the unacknowledged margins of anthropocentric thought. As Augustin Berque (2013) argues in *Thinking through Landscape*, the landscape is all too often seen but not taken as an object of contemplation. I would suggest, moreover, that Marder's (2013) conceptualization of the absolute alterity of the plant bears similarities with Freud's description of the

unconscious, especially when we consider that the radical core of Freud's thesis was lost through a process of cultural translation. When psychoanalysis was brought across the Atlantic, it was re-envisioned in the form of Ego psychiatry—the professional attempt to reclaim the will in the face of the seemingly chaotic forces of unconscious desire. This instrumentalist view of the unconscious echoes the modern conception of plant life as it attempts to attribute use-value and foreclose the idea of plant life as life independent of human intervention. Both *The Day of the Triffids* and *The Death of Grass* suggest that human encounters with the vegetal only occur when plants are assigned a use-value as either fuel or as an ingredient for consumption, or alternatively when they become obstructive to human *telos*. In this respect, Marder (2013) detects a crucial similarity in the rhetoric of both industrialists and environmental campaigners: the “instrumental approach to plants synthesizes in itself the rationale for deforestation and the defense of forests as ‘the lungs of the planet,’ seeing that both arguments fail to take into account vegetal life *as* life, aside from the external ends it might be called to serve” (p. 25). Treating the landscape depicted in *The Death of Grass* as analogous to the unconscious suggests the ways in which plant life may actually communicate, albeit in a manner that is typically imperceptible to human logos; in effect, the landscape speaks.

The depiction of the absence of vegetal life in *The Death of Grass* is highly evocative of the ways in which plants can be understood to speak through spatial extension, to which humans are typically indifferent. Marder (2013) conceives of this form of communication as “the spatial relations and articulations between beings, animate or inanimate” (p. 75). Human indifference to spatial extension is keenly observed in the novel when Custance crosses the Pennines and recalls childhood memories of his surroundings: “There had been a sense of isolation about the pass even then, a feeling of being in a country swept of life, despite the road and the railway line that hugged it” (p. 137). The personified actions of the man-made road and railway line contrast sharply with Custance's inability to perceive plant life *as* life. Instead, life is equated only with *human* life to the extent that even when the inanimate products of human life are imbued with vitality, plant life does not signify at all. We might also conceptualize the ways in which plants communicate by analogy to Plato's (1997) distinction between speech and writing. For Plato, writing is an impersonal and mechanical product in contrast to speech that supposedly offers direct access to the speaker's thoughts and that can be adapted in

response to its reception. He argues that speeches are orphaned as soon as they are written: “When it has once been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with understanding no less than those who have no business with it... And when it is faulted and attacked unfairly,” he continues, “it always needs its father’s support; alone, it can neither defend itself nor come to its own support” (p. 552). Plant life lacks speech organs and communicates instead through its materiality and its posture. Like Plato’s definition of writing, however, such a form of communication cannot conceal itself, cannot respond to external stimuli, and cannot control its reception. For these reasons, plant “speech” typically remains opaque to human observers.

Christopher’s novel highlights this opacity by portraying the *absence* of plant life. Like an audience shouting at the crocodile in a Punch and Judy show, the reader gains a heightened awareness of precisely what it is that the characters do not see. When Custance looks out over the landscape, plant “speech” fails to signify: “The heather still grew, but the moorland grasses were gone; the outcrops of rocks jutted like teeth in the head of a skull” (Christopher 2009, p. 137). Custance swiftly papers over this absence by projecting onto the landscape an anthropomorphic skull, an image that signifies in a specifically human manner. Like Plato’s conception of writing, plant life is unable to control its reception and may or may not be understood by the recipient. Communication through spatial extension cannot protect or defend the “speaker” and, instead, risks being effaced by human indifference, human products, and anthropocentric symbolism.

Both novels destabilize the relationship between plant and human, challenge the limits of anthropomorphism and, consequently, open up a space to reconsider plant life beyond its instrumental use-value. Plant life typically fails to signify as life in itself since it appears as a quotidian aspect of the landscape. The depiction of civilizational collapse in British post-war science fiction, however, highlights the interdependency of plant and human life. In *The Day of the Triffids*, the survivors ascribe intelligence to the vegetal monsters, which threatens to destabilize the primacy of the human. The survivors nonetheless fail adequately to conceptualize the alterity of plant-thought and seek, instead, to anthropomorphize the triffids, consequently rendering them merely receptacles for their unconscious desires. This procedure simply replaces the human with the triffid, rather than enacting a radical deconstruction of the metaphysical concept of margin and center. In other words, the survivors exhibit the logic of

cynical reason that reaffirms the false conception of plant-thought as a mirror of human thought. With this logic in mind, the triffids' actions appear as instinctual responses to external stimuli rather than elements of an alien intelligence. *The Day of the Triffids* opens up the question of whether plants think and signals that such thought would not simply be the projection or inversion of human thought but, rather, a form of radical alterity that may exceed the limits of perhaps irremediably anthropocentric language.

Meanwhile *The Death of Grass* demonstrates the limits of the ethic of care for the Other in the face of the demand of care for the Self. Consequently, the appeals of environmental campaigners appear instrumental insofar as they tend to present plant life as a necessary resource for human life, rather than life in itself. The novel's presentation of plant death as analogous to mass starvation highlights the impossibility of considering the plant as possessing the sanctity of human life, once again rendering the vegetal subaltern. In the end, both novels demonstrate that an encounter with the vegetal only occurs when plants are either ascribed with a use-value or become obstructive. This notion reveals via process of elimination the ways in which plants speak but are not heard. Whereas *The Day of the Triffids* portrays plants that transgress their limitations to become an invasive disruptor to anthropocentric thought, *The Death of Grass* highlights the subaltern status of plant life that communicates through materiality and posture, on condition of a willing recipient.

NOTE

1. Masen's rumination on the triffids' propensity to "ambush" humans was excised from the Modern Library edition (published in the USA) and only appears in the Penguin edition (published in the UK).

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