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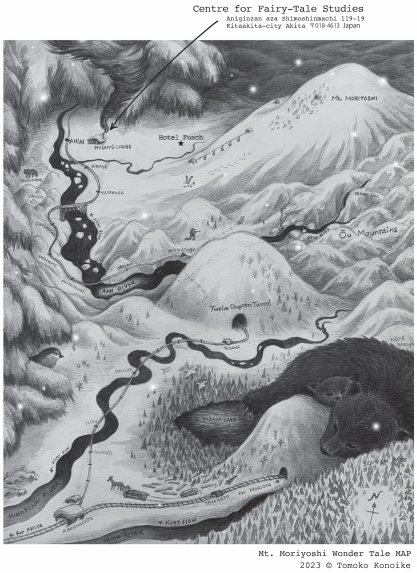

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Anthropocene Forms and the Victorian Novel: Micronarratives in Thomas Hardy's The Woodlanders

Elisabeth Alexandra Strayer

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Abstract
In the Anthropocene, how can the novel provide a suitable form for ecological thought? This article assesses Victorian literature's capacity to encompass large-scale intertwined forces, drawing on Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887) to argue that the novel can constitute micro-localised worlds, expanding the environmental imagination with its melding of human and more-than-human entities. Entangling character with environment and vacillating between foreground and background, Hardy's novel offers numerous moments of ecological description that position humans as interconnected components of the rural ecosphere. Nearly always, these moments animate the more-than-human realm by imbricating multiple facets of the environment to create what Eduardo Kohn terms 'an ecology of selves.' Rather than aggrandising or abolishing human agency, then, this sort of microfocus allows the novelist to place humans within the context of other modes of experience, other scales of being, and other methods of acting and feeling, methods that are crucial for grappling with the Anthropocene.

Scaling Down for the Anthropocene

It is nearly impossible to discuss the Anthropocene, our current geological epoch in which humans have become agents of climate change, without considering the scalar shifts it occasions in reconfiguring understandings of space, temporality, and human-ecological entanglement. Speaking to the human-oriented nature of the term, the "anthropo-" itself, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes: "To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our

imagination of the human" (206). Similarly, Jesse Oak Taylor, in his study of nineteenth-century British fiction, depicts the Anthropocene as occasioning a radical shift in scale "that demands that we similarly scale up our thinking in response" (217). These summons to scale up our thought and our imagination have resonated across ecocritical scholarship, proving a fashionable tool for comprehending the great swathes of both space (global, universal, planetary) and time (multigenerational, geological, futuristic) that coincide when we tackle the human scale alongside the geological.

While scale itself is a crucial term for thinking environmentally, I argue that too much emphasis has been placed on scaling *up*. Other scales—smaller scales—offer an intimacy and a sense of immersion that large-scale Anthropocene thought too often glosses over. Analysing narratives has gained traction as a mode of thinking through and across scales, yet we must employ the very act of analysis more forcefully to counter the erasure to which large-scale thought leads. Discussing the "problem with scale," Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing points to a methodological problem in the production of much modern knowledge wherein it has become common to scale up one's research framework without adjusting the underlying research questions. To counter this practice, she contends, "we must revitalize arts of noticing" (37-38). This article takes up Tsing's turn toward the arts of noticing, specifically through the potential of *literary* noticing, while resisting the idea that practicing these arts mandates scaling up. Rather, I draw on formal analysis and close reading—in this case, of *The Woodlanders* (1887) by Thomas Hardy—to reveal the novel as a space where narrative techniques fully immerse us in the nuanced ecosystem that joins human with environment.

Hardy has long been considered an extraordinarily environmental Victorian novelist. In fact, he categorized many of his own works as "novels of character and environment" in a profession of his distinctively ecological interests (Miller 698). *The Woodlanders*, as one of these "novels of character and environment," intertwines lavish descriptions of the natural world with its exploration of the lives and relationships of the humans who live in Little Hintock, a rural village in Hardy's fictional literary landscape of Wessex. In particular, the novel features the interconnected stories of local woodsman Giles Winterborne; his childhood sweetheart, Grace Melbury; Dr Edred Fitzpiers, a newcomer who eventually marries Grace; and Marty South, a peasant girl who has long harboured unrequited feelings for Giles. My reading of *The Woodlanders* centres on how these and other human inhabitants of Little Hintock are imbricated with the landscape itself, arguing for Hardy's use of description as a mode of accessing environmental depth in the novel.

Attending to descriptive moments necessitates a scaling down that counters much Victorian ecocriticism, which often lauds Hardy's novels for their navigation of enormous temporal and spatial disjunctions at a grand scale suitable for the Anthropocene.[2] While Gillian Beer writes that Hardy's plots "pay homage to human scale by ceasing as the hero or heroine dies," I turn away from both plot and the human scale by attending to the ecological descriptions, or what Beer might simply term "writing" in contradistinction to a human-centred "plot" (223). Entangling character with environment and vacillating between foreground and background, these moments position humans as interconnected components of the rural ecosphere. Nearly always, they animate the more-than-human realm by featuring multiple facets of the environment to create what anthropologist Eduardo Kohn terms "an ecology of selves" (78). Rather than aggrandising or abolishing human agency, then, Hardy's microfocus allows him to place humans within the context of other modes of experience, other scales of being, and other methods of acting and feeling. His descriptive moments offer representations of and engagements with more-than-human agents, eliding the boundary between humans and environment that many critics are so keen to delineate. Encouraging a narrow focus, Hardy's novels constitute micro-localised communities, expanding the environmental imagination with their imbrication of human and more-than-human entities. In its moments of description, moments where language surges to the forefront and circumscribes a literary ecology, the novel contains scaled-down structures that privilege the natural world and force us to challenge assumptions of human dominance in the Anthropocene.

This article is also a rejoinder to rationales for humanists' contribution to the Anthropocene that demand we scale upwards, pivoting from the local to the global to account for the limits of human agency and to approach temporality through a geological framework. Increasingly, critics such as Timothy Clark and Amitav Ghosh have questioned literature's ability to address the Anthropocene. In *The Great Derangement* (2016), for instance, Ghosh argues that the Anthropocene is shaped by entities of "unthinkable magnitude" (63). Similarly, Aaron Rosenberg suggests that fiction shifting between human and nonhuman scales creates "a narrative excess" that unsettles our comprehension of the novel as a network of human relationships (183). Such analysis positions the scaled-up Anthropocene as an epoch at violent odds with the novel in its paradigmatic nineteenth-century forms.

At what scale, then, should we comprehend manifestations of environmental thought in the Victorian novel, a form that signals an awareness of the potentially catastrophic anthropogenic effects on climate

prior to a widespread cultural awareness of climate change? The answer, I claim, requires we analyse how novels ask us to *scale down*. Rather than manifesting as an unbearable or deranged symptom of scalar disjunction, the novel introduces formal structures that forward a solution for this crisis of representation. Against the emergence of global systems, nineteenth-century British novels such as *The Woodlanders* offer a technology of containment with surprisingly radical and subversive implications. In Hardy's structures of enclosure, 'background' descriptions surge to the foreground and nonhuman subjects partake in agential networks. Relying on a range of formal techniques, he problematises representational boundaries in their attempts to depict large-scale environmental concepts.

"An Ecology of Selves" and Hardy's Vital Materialism

Thomas Hardy imagines a nature that has already written itself into us, rendering no domestic space untouched by it. The thrust of his environmental vision lies not in his strategic deployment of genre, but—on a fittingly smaller scale—in his descriptions that privilege linguistic detail over plot. In his four-item checklist of environmentally oriented literature characteristics, Lawrence Buell lists the importance of the nonhuman environment "not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history," citing Hardy's works as especially exemplary of this mindset (7). But equally relevant to Hardy is Buell's second item: "the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest" (7). And it is precisely this interest that marks the note on which *The Woodlanders* begins.

Like many of Hardy's novels, *The Woodlanders* imagines a world (here, a forest) teeming with the activity of animals, plants, and humans alike. From its opening chapters, every part of the novel's world is vibrantly, even violently, alive, as when Marty South emerges from her cottage after a sleepless night of spar-making:

> A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking sound of two over-crowded branches in the neighbouring wood, which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalised sorrows of the trees, together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward woodpigeon ill-balanced on its roosting bough. (Hardy 16)

In Marty's brief journey between her home and her shed, she encounters a bizarre symphony of interwoven natural sounds: windblown branches,

screeching owls, and a tumbling woodpigeon. Attuned to various components within the environment, this description grants each life form a moment in the foreground. First, Hardy personifies the trees; engaged in conflict, they vocally manifest their own agony. Then, in contrast with the unspecified number of owls, the woodpigeon emerges as a singular being, audible not for its song, as may be anticipated, but for its clumsy fall. And as soon as she steps outside, Marty, the sole human presence in this scene, becomes imbricated within this group of more-than-human entities. By breaking the environment down into an assemblage of specific beings, Hardy here imbues the woods with a vitality and animacy that decentres the human presence in the land.

Throughout *The Woodlanders*, Hardy delineates Little Hintock as a microcosm with an environmental and social atmosphere distinct from that of the world beyond. Uniquely nebulous, atmosphere evades representation. Yet Hardy's attention to boundaries allows him to circumscribe an atmospheric space that, if not visible, can certainly be sensed. Dora Zhang usefully theorises this hazy concept, casting the act of "feeling the atmosphere" as something embodied that gives rise to an understanding of how humans and nonhumans can coexist in a space, defying clear boundaries between self and the surrounding environment (125-6). Zhang's attention to the interchange between human and nonhuman bodies is crucial to my reading of Hardy's efforts to frame the village community. Dependent on technologies of containment, Little Hintock plays host to a proliferation of moments that celebrate the entanglement between human and more-than-human lives. Within Hardy's microcosmic vision, an atmospheric palette emerges, predicated on the descriptive space afforded to all types of beings as well as on the conflation of foreground and background that occurs most compellingly in this smaller sphere of focus.

Close reading the novel's descriptions grants space for the background and for the nonhuman to emerge as central components of the narrative. For thinking about how Hardy reworks the status of setting and character, Kohn's work proves instructive. In *How Forests Think*, Kohn expands upon interdisciplinary attempts to develop a framework that bridges the human and the nonhuman; his scholarship offers a posthuman critique of human exceptionalism that probes "what it might mean to say that forests think" (6-7). A thinking forest, for one, comprises "an ecology of selves." This crucial phrase necessitates expanding the boundaries of selfhood beyond "animals with brains" to plants and other nonhumans (Kohn 75). In Kohn's broadly construed definition, selfhood is not necessarily "coterminous with a physically bounded organism," but can encompass many bodies (e.g., a crowd)

or appear within a body (e.g., a cell) (75). Informed by Kohn's work, I shift this attention to boundaries into the literary realm, reading Little Hintock and its forested surroundings as an ecology of selves.

Little Hintock's ecology of selves becomes apparent through those small-scale, descriptive moments where Hardy explores the potential of the novel to circumscribe networks in which more-than-human semiotics and agencies coalesce. Depth is central to his narration of entanglement, and in this case, depth takes the form of ecological embeddedness. Attending to dendrography in another of Hardy's novels, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), Elizabeth Carolyn Miller pushes back against critiques of Hardy's bioregional rootedness to argue that the novel's dendrography discloses the existence of "more than one vector along which we might measure a work's outward reach" (699). My own analysis similarly turns to another axis, considering neither time in the geological sense nor space in the universal sense, but a depth of environmental relation that emerges in that microcosmic place—that 'ecology of selves'—known as Little Hintock. We must attend not to the universe as a whole, but to a sliver of it. Rather than delimiting a scale for the human, I argue, Hardy's attention to the microcosm permits him to articulate what it means for the human to exist as part of the world.

As with the wrestling trees and tumbling woodpigeon, the microcosmic structure allows for great depth in its ability to convey nonhuman activity and, moreover, nonhuman agency. In their new materialist work, Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann observe that although agency comes in many forms, all such forms are material and "the meanings they produce influence in various ways the existence of both human and non-human natures" (3). Agency transcends humans and human intentionality alike, emerging as "a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter" (Iovino and Oppermann 3). Hardy is particularly productive for thinking about how literature can challenge conventions of narrative agency, as Elisha Cohn notes; he paints human agency as "profoundly unstable" against the background of a novel marked by an unpredictable ecosystem, frequent perspectival shifts, and swarming, flocking animals that are multiple rather than individuated (501). In making space for various forms of nonhuman agency to flourish, Hardy articulates a vital materialism that, per Jane Bennett's definition, resists anthropocentrism and hinges upon the ability of nonhuman entities to assert their own agency in a world dominated by human thought (xvi). Narrative attention to agency and nonhuman materiality, then, becomes a key method for analysing Hardy's descriptions and how they valorise the more-than-human.

As a foundational component of his writing process, Hardy's notebooks evince his engagement with contemporary work that promoted alternative notions of animacy beyond the human. In his notes from the mid-1870s through 1888, he quotes Herbert Spencer's *The Principles of Biology*: "A glacier has almost the properties of an animate thing. It grows, decays, in a tolerably constant ratio" (*The Literary Notebooks* 90). And from Oswald Heer's *The Primaeval World of Switzerland*, Hardy cites a description of a landscape from the Carboniferous period: "There was none of the higher animals: no birds rested on the branches of the trees: no mammal in the forests. The air was sultry & full of vapour, the soil hot and steaming: & the stillness was profound, broken only by the plashing of the rain, or the whistling of the wind as it passed by the leaves of the trees" (*The Literary Notebooks* 89-90). These brief excerpts from a dense compendium of research find Hardy grappling with the possibilities that emerge when humans share, or even cede, the spotlight. Spencer's attention to the glacier invites consideration of what happens when inanimate objects are imbued with animate qualities, while the passage from Heer pushes the imagination further in illustrating a vibrant world devoid of humans and even other animals. Recalling the drama of the trees in the opening passage, the sultry air, steaming soil, and whistling wind easily find resonance in Hardy's own woodland.

Hardy's fiction puts his reading and research into practice. Framing Little Hintock as a self-contained atmospheric microcosm, Hardy imagines the ecological depth that can emerge through attending to a community on a small scale. His ecosystem teems with nonhuman entities that seem, almost, to be characters in their own right—and that act with deep violence in their own contexts, even when devoid of the human presence. In the world of *The Woodlanders*, Hardy steers clear of human-imposed confinement, envisioning the environment as itself a container of an ecosystem that synthesises human with more-than-human, rather than thinking on the scale of the individual or even, more broadly, of humanity. The isolated village of Little Hintock thus emerges as a place characterised not only by the drama of its human characters, but also by a vital materialism that the novel's environmental vision generates. Through description, itself a kind of enclosure, Hardy delineates the novel's micronarratives and microspaces, blurring the long-established binaries between human and environment, between foreground and background.

Centring the More-than-Human

Fundamentally, *The Woodlanders* asks us to rethink the way that more-than-human agency manifests within an ecological sphere. Beyond the figurative and corporeal intermingling of human and more-than-human agents, Hardy's 'ecology of selves' emerges through reworking the divide between background and foreground, and through employing personification—each a critical mode of decentring the human in this novel. Who, precisely, are the woodlanders of the novel's title? From the standpoint of material ecocriticism, this term could encompass not only the human characters at their varying levels of environmental relationality, but also the personified trees, birds, and flowers that take their turns in the foreground.

Material ecocriticism demands the defamiliarisation of narrative structures. Iovino and Oppermann structure their anthology of material ecocritical thought around what they envision as a simple conceptual argument: "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (1). In a description of Marty and Giles as the novel's most ecologically entangled characters, Hardy describes their intimate relationship to the woods of Little Hintock: they "had been able to read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing" and "mentally collected those remoter signs and symbols which, seen in few, were of runic obscurity, but all together made an alphabet" (331). With an abundance of linguistic and semiotic terminology, this passage paints Giles and Marty as full participants in their broader environmental network. Unlike other villagers, these two can effortlessly parse the woodland's many agential selves, which Hardy expresses through their comprehension of the area's language and symbols. But aside from explicit references to the acts of reading and writing, we are also tasked with reading ecologically in the proliferation of descriptions that focus on the village's dynamic ecosphere. This practice draws from Taylor's notion of "reading for atmosphere" (7). As an ecocritical method, Taylor proposes, atmospheric reading requires transforming setting into something active and agential rather than a passive container for narrative events (36). Harnessing Taylor's method, I approach the ecosphere of *The Woodlanders* by considering its depth of agential figures, which has entailed framing the textual environment as a sort of atmospheric microcosm. Extending outward from the human, the atmospherically interpreted novel chooses, as Taylor writes, "not to account for individual subjects but to materialize the climates of history" (15). In this

materialisation, the environment acquires a crucial subjectivity, and even a human-like consciousness.

Intrinsically ecological, the practice of reading climatically shifts our conventions for understanding foreground and background—much as the study of ecology encourages attending to life forms within systems, rather than in isolation (Kerridge 130). Hardy employs narrative form to articulate interdependency, Richard Kerridge contends, with "a distinctive way of introducing characters that shows how they ceaselessly make and remake each other's identity" (130). At several different scales, John South's relationship with the elm tree illustrates this sort of dependence. John South tells Giles, "I could bear up, I know I could, if it were not for the tree—yes, the tree, 'tis that's killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow" (91). He follows by narrating a lifetime of entanglement with this particular elm:

> 'Ah, when it was quite a small tree,' he said, 'and I was a little boy, I thought one day of chopping it off with my hook to make a clothes-line with. But I put off doing it… And at last it got too big, and now 'tis my enemy, and will be the death o' me. Little did I think, when I let that sapling stay, that a time would come when it would torment me, and dash me into my grave.' (91)

Marty elaborates on her father's connection, saying, "The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him and keep him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock" (101). John South's intimacy with the elm is a crucial moment in the novel's elision of the binary between the human and the more-than-human. The description assumes the tenor of familial connections, embedding the human within the wood and the wood within the human, and imagining the tree as a figure with deep agency—enough to kill a man, or so John South thinks.

The relationship between person and tree dictates other aspects of the ecospherical network: for one, John South's death marks a transference of property wherein Giles will lose his familial homestead. Deprived of a home, he relocates to a small cottage, which he relinquishes to Grace; in giving up his new dwelling, he lives exposed to the elements, which brings about his death. And Giles' death undermines the stability of the very trees he planted in the forest, as "the corpses seemed to show the want of him" (326). Finally, on an even grander scale, Marty's comment that "Others have been like it afore in Hintock" (101) implies that John South is not the only villager to have this

sort of life-altering relationship with the local woodland. With this single instance manifesting in a variety of ways, as Kerridge writes, "the special value of Hardy to ecocritics is precisely in the way he does not separate place and person" (141). On a similar register, Iovino's discussion of natural agency provides a frame to return to Hardy, as "landscape and nonhuman subjects have to be integrated in the narrative framework as essential components of the place's 'material imagination'" (107). In the material imagination of the novel, Hardy imbricates place and person, as well as setting and other more-than-human subjects, to imagine an ecological system composed of a vibrant network of agents and selves. This literary landscape transcends mere description, instead becoming an outlet for Hardy to contemplate the complex tapestry of Little Hintock; in this world where humans and trees share a remarkable intimacy, the cross-species interplay heightens the drama.

A Foregrounded Background

Joining network with narrative calls for an adjustment from a typical mode of human-centred readership. In decentring plot, Taylor writes, "Foreground becomes background and background becomes foreground" (15). Recasting what constitutes foreground and background is a keen topic of material ecocritical interest, and one that we can locate in Hardy's own literary imagination. Stacy Alaimo concedes that a material ecocritical framework in which human and nonhuman alike possess agency challenges our ability to understand nature as "mere background" for human activity because "'nature' is always as close as one's own skin—perhaps even closer" (2). In the elision between John South and the elm tree, Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, or the vital act of "thinking across bodies," emerges (2). Hardy's twinned entities force us to reshape our perception of the environment as an inert space or a resource for human consumption, and instead to view the tree as vibrantly alive, part of "a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions" (Alaimo 2). In our present ecological crisis, recognising the environment's very corporeality may be one of the most apt critical tools for driving sustainability and mobilising human action. By approaching narrative as a process of fluctuation, we might reconsider, and more deeply value, both nonhuman components of the environment and, indeed, the environment as a whole.

Even in scenes with a human emphasis, Hardy destabilises the notion of foreground and background. For instance, when Giles invites the Melbury family to his home, he also asks some additional villagers, "in dearth of other

friends, that the room might not appear empty" (75). But Giles comes to regret this move: "In his mind's eye, before the event, they had been the mere background or padding of the scene; but somehow in the reality they were the most prominent personages there" (75). In a way, this sentence could sum up the whole novel. Though the scene presents an interlude from the pervasive woodland setting, Hardy demonstrates concern in balancing components of Little Hintock's ecosphere. In this enclosed system, all agents—human and more-than-human alike—play a distinct role and warrant attention.

The natural world which, in so many other texts, is intended to remain in the background, may surge up, unexpectedly or otherwise, to occupy a prominent position for Hardy. In its more ecological moments, Hardy's writing is saturated with salient environmental details that so many novels treat as inconsequential. His particular attention to qualities of setting and environment, or that which might typically be understood as background, compels William Cohen to suggest a reading practice that resonates with Taylor's attention to atmosphere. Cohen cites a shift in priorities that emerges when we read Hardy; compared with other writers, he argues, Hardy nudges us to linger not on character or plot, but on the "boring parts": in other words, Hardy's many descriptions, particularly of the natural world and how it interacts with the human characters (6). These moments might be approached more generously through the phrase "dilatory description," which Amy King coins in her discussion of the realist novel (461). Thwarting theories of realism that privilege the reader's desire to reach the end of a text, dilatory description urges us to dwell on moments where the writer prioritizes descriptive passages rather than forging onward with the plot (King 461). It invites the reader to labour over details—a practice upon which Hardy draws frequently. In *The Woodlanders*, Hardy often reserves 'dilatory description' for images of trees and wildlife, which invites a reconfiguring of character itself. But thinking ecocritically and atmospherically can also allow for approaching the novel through an alternative methodology wherein the environment—and its agential vitality—takes centre stage in its own right.

Hardy's formal techniques invite us to read over and around the typical plot; by crafting a networked literary ecosystem that decentres the human, he explodes the potential for a text into a dialogue about meaning. Reading for nonhuman characters forms a key tenet of Elizabeth Hope Chang's provocative *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (2019). Chang prefaces her argument by critiquing the tendency of readers to focus not only on human characters, but also on any entities that could be "human-aligned" (5). For Chang, however, moments

where a text attends closely to the nonhuman, particularly a plant, should not be seen as disruptive narrative gaps, but rather as an opportunity for the reader—particularly a British subject living through the imperial age—to think critically about their own agency and selfhood (9). So often relinquished to the background of both a plot and its analysis, these components of a narrative make meaning "not only by operating as resonant shards of figuration diverting the progress," but also "simply by making space for their own description in the wide field of the novel's setting" (Chang 9). Fictional plants decentre the human, Chang theorizes, in how they "shift narrative weight and significance away from a centrally human form" (33), as well as in their capacity to become, "if not equivalent to a human character, at least character-adjacent" (37).

Some of Hardy's more-than-human agents are character-adjacent in multiple ways. John South's elm, for instance, is personified like a human character; but in a more literal sense, it is also adjacent to John South himself, as becomes apparent in their intertwined lives. If we usher plants like this into the narrative realm and grant them character status, proposes Chang, we can ultimately subvert our conventional understanding of fiction's parameters by granting a nonhuman entity narrative agency and eliding the boundaries between setting and character (161). At its root, Hardy's ecological system relies upon extended descriptions of setting; perhaps a reading of these spaces as filled with more-than-human characters, or selves as characters, can grant them a status more akin to foreground than to background.

But what constitutes background or foreground, and for whom? Hardy repeatedly calls attention to the simultaneity of various foregrounds according to where we position the subject, as in this scene at the opening of Volume III that seems at first glimpse to be a simple overview of setting, or one of Cohen's "boring parts":

> The time was that dull interval in a woodlander's life which coincides with great activity in the life of the woodland itself—a period following the close of the winter tree-cutting, and preceding the barking season, when the saps are just beginning to heave with the force of hydraulic lifts inside all the trunks of the forest (247).

Again, evoking Heer's illustration of the Carboniferous period, this paragraph imagines a world populated and animated by nonhumans. Yet it transcends sheer description, advocating for the agency of subjects beyond the human. In it, the more-than-human woodland becomes a point of comparison

for the human woodlander; the two seem, in fact, to swap places. The ecosphere of Little Hintock reverberates with activity regardless of season, and only the participants in said activity now vary. Though the woodlander may be enduring a period of dullness where work with the trees is not viable, Hardy proposes that the woods still course with energy—if one only knows where to look. Rising above the human at this moment, the sap within the tree trunks represents Little Hintock's primary source of vitality during this period of minimal human labour. Hardy's employment of personification here also seems significant for decentring the human. As Heather Keenleyside argues, it is possible to personify nonhuman entities, imbuing them with agency and affect, without explicitly humanizing them (463).[3] Similarly, in the passage above, Hardy attends simultaneously to humans and nonhumans by describing both the obvious human inaction and the less visible occurrences within the trees themselves. That the woodland itself participates in "great activity," including in its heaving saps, paints the trees and the whole forest as agents in the ecological system. They maintain an active state while the humans are largely at rest but, crucially, they do not replace the humans—rather, their agency positions them on equal footing.

Personification also gains traction through repetition. Hardy relies upon recurring language and imagery that imbues the forest with agency. These moments—the novel's most ecogothic—occur most commonly in extended descriptions of the woodland's violent, grotesque scenery. In *The Woodlanders*, as in Hardy's corpus more generally, the participating characters are typically trees; he animates them and their broader environment variously, and always in vivid terms. Though seemingly minor, these nonhuman actors perform important narrative work and make apparent the ecological depth of Little Hintock's microcosm. They invert the customary relationship of foreground and background, commanding us to participate in reading practices that decentre the human and acknowledge the vibrant materiality of the ecosphere's nonhuman members.

These analogous passages, which appear throughout the novel, represent some of the most striking sections of text. In the first, we return to the description of Marty South stepping outside early in the novel:

> A lingering wind brought to her ear the creaking sound of two over-crowded branches in the neighbouring wood, which were rubbing each other into wounds, and other vocalised sorrows of the trees, together with the screech of owls, and the fluttering tumble of some awkward woodpigeon ill-balanced on its roosting bow. (16)

This passage is but one of many in the text where animals enact strange, ungainly behaviour. The woodpigeon's clumsy manoeuvring stands out repeatedly: moving through its home with a "fluttering tumble," it reads as both "awkward" and "ill-balanced." Such surprising inelegance circles back into the text at other points in the form of animals who fail to behave according to custom, from "a squirrel, which did not run up its tree, …dropping the sweet chestnut which it carried" (328) to "the similar sanguine errors of impulsive birds in framing nests that were now swamped by snow-water" (126). Together, these moments articulate a world devoid of legible patterns—a world in which human behaviour's variable and unpredictable nature is no longer a singular quality, for blunders permeate the whole landscape. Of course, the most vivid image in this description is that of the branches "rubbing each other into wounds." Rachel Ablow calls attention to this description, asking how we are meant to interpret these wounded trees, given how little space they take up in the novel as a whole (118). Yet the "personifying pathos" of Hardy's descriptive language, suggests Ablow, may linger with the reader; the trees are subjects worth attending to, particularly as "'wounds' and 'sorrows' are terms we tend not to associate with trees" (118). By rendering trees as subjects, Hardy pushes the reader's attention toward the forest itself, which is part of a larger gesture; though these particular trees feature only briefly, Hardy's constant attention to trees in general takes up quite a bit of the narrative.

Further underscoring the interpretation of Hardy's trees as subjects, a moment closer to the end of the novel reiterates the intrinsic violence of their interaction. Grace has temporarily moved to Giles's cottage, and during her tenure there, she wakes one morning and peers out the window in search of the woodsman. However, she fails to find him:

> all she could see were more trees, jacketed with lichen and stockinged with moss… Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbours that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago, rising from their mossy setting like decayed teeth from green gums. (311)

As with the earlier passage, Hardy's attention to detail results not in romanticisation but in revulsion. He employs notes of the ecogothic in contrast to the wounded, "disfigured" trees with the "rotting stumps" below,

suggesting that the trees, too, will one day resemble nothing more than "decayed teeth." Most striking here, though, is the precise language that delimits the nature of the arboreal conflict. Dozens of chapters after the earlier, overtly violent description of the trees, a nearly identical passage has appeared. Evoking the "over-crowded *branches* in the neighbouring wood, which were *rubbing* each other into *wounds*," this later passage's trees display "*branches* disfigured with *wounds* resulting from their mutual *rubbings* and blows" (emphases mine). With these kindred phrases, Hardy calls attention to an ecological, more-than-human conflict: a battle between the woodland's trees that has persisted, unresolved, over the course of the whole novel. That the trees are greatly overcrowded both perpetuates this violence and reminds us of the network of boughs circumscribing the very sphere that wind, light, and rain struggle to penetrate throughout. Coupled with a reading of the trees as subjects or even characters, this continuity illuminates the presence of Little Hintock's nonhuman community.

Language and Material Narrativity

Further marking the text as a network that includes more-than-human stories, instances of shared language punctuate the additional scenes that offer extended descriptions of setting. The environmental drama bookended by the nearly twinned images of sparring trees verges into foreground territory throughout the novel, reminding us of the many agents in this 'ecology of selves.' The text's midpoint includes several particularly revolting depictions of the woodland. On his way to visit Mrs. Charmond, for example, Fitzpiers crosses through the park,

> where slimy streams of green moisture, exuding from decayed holes caused by old amputations, ran down the bark of the oaks and elm… Wrinkled like an old crone's face, and antlered with dead branches that rose above the foliage of their summits, they were nevertheless still green—though yellow had invaded the leaves of other trees. (196-197)

And in pursuit of Fitzpiers not long after, Grace Melbury and her father pause "beneath a half-dead oak, hollow, and disfigured with white tumours, its roots spreading out like accipitrine claws grasping the ground" (211). As in the other environmental descriptions, these personified trees have fallen to ruin in a war-like process. Reminiscent of the "wrestling" trees and the "vanquished" stumps, these have "decayed" to a "half-dead" state. They have been "invaded" and marked by "amputations" and "tumours," rendering them "disfigured"—

a term present also in the scene where Grace looks through the window for Giles. The proliferation of the grotesque, emphasised through repetition, breaks from the human-centred narrative to demand our attention.

Personifying those other selves that comprise Little Hintock's ecosystem, these repeated moments, with their striking and unsavoury language, invite us to destabilise our customary focus on human characters and human plots; instead, we can begin to conceive of an ecology of selves. I read this narrative technique, again turning to a tenet of material ecocriticism, as an exemplification of what Iovino and Oppermann term "material narrativity," which veers away from human-centred literature (8). "Framed as material-discursive encounters," they contend, "literary stories emerge from the intra-action of human creativity and the narrative agency of matter. Playing together, this shared creativity of human and nonhuman agents generates new narratives and discourses that give voice to the complexity of our collective" (8). As with Kohn's notion of dissolved selfhood and collective agency, it is as if Hardy simply draws out the agency latent in his microcosmic woodland to produce a narrative where materiality emerges from the background to take centre stage.

For all its intimacy with the more-than-human world, of course, *The Woodlanders* is ultimately a novel mediated, like any other, through the human lens of its author. I am tempted to read Hardy as the conductor of a scientific experiment of sorts. After all, he has constructed an enclosed atmospheric space (Little Hintock, or the novel itself) in which his 'ecology of selves' can play out. Yet Hardy wields this microlocalised scale in a more humanistic sense. Just as Kohn notes that "Entertaining the viewpoints of other beings blurs the boundaries that separate kinds of selves" (132), Hardy participates in the "capacious ethical practice" (134) of imagining various modes of entanglement between the human and the more-than-human. By reading for these scaled-down moments, we, too, can come to understand the novel as a fitting mode for thinking ecologically and continuing to reimagine networks—both narrative and environmental—in the Anthropocene.

Notes

[1] This article is drawn from the author's dissertation, *Victorian Microcosms: Environmental Formalism in the Novel* (2021).

[2] See: Anna Henchman, *The Starry Sky Within: Astronomy and the Reach of the Mind in Victorian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Benjamin Morgan,

"Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy's Rocks and Stars," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse O. Taylor, AnthropoScene: The SLSA Book Series (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 132–149; Aaron Rosenberg, "'Infinitesimal Lives': Thomas Hardy's Scale Effects," in *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, ed. Philip Steer and Nathan K. Hensley (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 182–199.

[3] Keenleyside's analysis comes from a reading of James Thomson's *The Seasons*, in which she proffers an instructive model for analysing personification. She identifies Thomson's "careful juxtapositions of human and nonhuman creatures and of perceptible and imperceptible actions," contending that although "Thomson does not *humanize* the sun or air or rivers," "he does *personify* both elements and animals by granting them the kind of agency and affect proper to persons" (463).

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