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Of Trees and Men. Arboreal Kinship in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*

Victorian Trees: an Overview

Before analysing the indicated novels, I wish to ponder the cultural and physical landscapes that were contemporary to their release, i.e. the second half of the nineteenth century. Although their publication is separated by almost 30 years, the novels share an incontrovertibly similar narrative foundation, which pertains to the premise (namely the consequences of involvement in a love rectangle), as well as to the setting (a fictional woodland village that appears insulated from the modern world in a figurative and literal sense, for the temporal plane is reversed by around fifty years). Indeed, this last aspect in particular – the fact that both writers perform a kind of sentimental mythicisation of the rural community – testifies to the plots drawing on the pastoral conventions. Even though the two texts subvert these conventions rather than replicate them (as indicated by Alain Barrat for Eliot and David Lodge for Hardy), the association represents a useful common denominator, while also providing a vital historical context, for it is inherently connected to the restructuralisation of the sylvan space in the Victorian era. Therefore, it is helpful to consider the status acquired by the genre at that time, for the re-evaluation and reappraisal of the pastoral which shapes the literary panorama of the nineteenth century stems from the coincident reshaping of the physical environment and from the reactions to its unprecedented transformation.

As indicated by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*, 19th-century Britain presents itself as an unprecedently industrialized and urbanized society, in which agriculture assumes a distinctly marginal position. The dizzying export level of the new industrial production and the economy's newly acquired inability to sustain itself on local resources contributed to the rising tensions between the expansion of colonial rule and the concept of 'home' as both a memory and an ideal.[1] This, in turn, led to the mythologisation of the English countryside, supposed to shelter the Victorians from the hellscape of the industrial city that began to stultify the faculty of relating the external world to the inner lives, thus creating an overwhelming sense of spatial detachment.[2] Amidst this sense of unrest, the pastoral became the perfect

[1] R. Williams, pp. 280–81.
[2] R. A. Forsyth, p. 228.

vessel to express the yearning for a land and a community blessedly untarnished by synthetic influences. In fact, as Owen Schur states, the pastoral genre derives its power from the tension-filled dialectic between the bucolic and the urban, and the bucolic is essentially defined through the interaction with its infrastructural opposite.[3]

One could, therefore, entertain the idea that the drastic alterations to which the natural landscape was subjected in the nineteenth century and the ensuing exposure of the frangibility of trees became a necessary catalyst for their appreciation. Indeed, the decline in British woodland between 1750 and 1850 planted seeds of acute anxiety about trees' precarious position in the context of national security and emerging industries. Consequently, they acquired their status as different signifiers – running the gamut of wealth, property, nature, beauty and freedom – and gained popularity in pictorial art and literature.[4] Additionally, due to financial inducements granted to landlords for planting trees on their estates, the British arboreal area would transform significantly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the more ancient specimens – now growing alongside newly developed plantations – would be elevated in ideological status and revered as a symbol of endurance against the overpowering flow of modernity.[5] As such, their presence in the landscape was rendered conspicuous through the overlap of their geographical situation and their socially manufactured relation to human experience.[6]

It may be observed how trees remained seamlessly integrated into the landscape, despite – or perhaps because of – all the seismic changes brought about by the frenetic expansion of urban infrastructure. Indeed, they become a physicalized manifestation of the country's past, functioning as botanical vessels of human sentiment. A similar stance is found in Richard Muir's idea about trees enjoying a dual existence, one that is objective, for it relates to topography, and the other subjective, for it belongs to the mindscape. What is more, some aspects of the symbolic potency of the woods derive from images that are at odds with historical accounts. Indeed, many notions of the woodland, which became embedded within the human conscience over time, are rooted in spaces that owe their perpetuation solely to the myths and legends of various cultural and ecological contexts.[7] From this stance, trees appear as entities that are simultaneously atemporal and temporalized: on the one hand, they are, following Jacob George Strutt's characterisation, 'silent witnesses of the successive generations of men', seemingly unswayed by the flow of time, while on the other they seem to draw their sap from the lore that gradually flourished around them.[8] As such, the arboreal provides vital identitarian anchorage and creates – however illusorily – a sense of rootedness in both the temporal and the spatial continuum, which seems particularly sought after in the nineteenth century, an age pervaded by the feeling of isolation and the resulting nostalgia for 'an earlier world of country peace and

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[3] O. Schur, p. 3.
[4] P.A. Elliott., et al., pp. 11–12.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 35.
[6] A. Burton, p. 145.
[7] R. Muir, p. 229.
[8] J.G. Strutt, p. xv.

unifying belief.[9] This accounts for why Hardy and Eliot decided to distance their texts from the contemporary landscape: indeed, by centring the plot around a pastoral-like community whose sustenance is contingent on the surrounding woodland, both authors managed to create a narrative that eludes the impact of modernity and in which the conception of the past is vividly tactile, contained within the boughs hanging above the characters.

The Woodlanders

Serialized in *Macmillan's Magazine* from May 1886 to April 1887 and published in three volumes the same year, *The Woodlanders* was recognized by Hardy as one of the 'Novels of Character and Environment' – a phrase he first used in the 'General Preface' to the Wessex Edition of his works from 1912. As Linda Joyce Baker argues, 'environment' in this context is not merely defined as a geographical area inhabited by the characters, but it also encompasses how those characters adapt to their surroundings.[10] Therefore, the intricate correlation between the natural and the human undergirds the structure of the text, which is indicated by the very title.

What is more, the meticulously faithful depictions of agrarian culture – introduced by Hardy as a means of chronicling and consequently preserving the fading model of rural life – and the emphasis put on the agricultural immersion of the protagonists allow to apprehend the idiosyncratic attachment which they form towards their surroundings.[11] A similar correlation may be observed in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, which – although preceding the creation of the pastoral genre by around 500 years – delineates a world where agriculture is equated with worship of the Gods, and tilling the soil constitutes a prerequisite for spiritual fulfilment.[12] Were one to juxtapose this 'agri-cultic' perspective with the Hardyan woodlanders, one would notice that – in addition to providing vital economic resources – the agrarian spirit of Wessex imprints itself upon its inhabitants in a more arcane manner. Indeed, it creates the perception of trees as fully-fledged members of the community whose rearing endows one with a unique sensibility to the porosity of the boundaries between the human and the arboreal. The fading of these distinctions is established from the opening chapter, where the nocturnal village of Little Hintock 'could still be distinguished by a few faint lights, winking more or less ineffectually through the leafless boughs, and the indescribable songsters they bore, in the form of balls of feathers, at roots among them'.[13] The fact that the view of the human-made dwelling is almost completely obstructed by the woods encircling it contributes to the reader's impression that the trees interfere with the community to an intensely visceral degree and that

[9] W. E. Houghton, p. 77.
[10] L.J. Baker, p. 3.
[11] R. Draper, p. 44.
[12] V. Winiwarter and W.E.H. Blum, pp. 115–16.
[13] T. Hardy, p. 38.

they tower over the protagonists not only in the literal sense, but also in a figurative one. Indeed, as pointed out by Claire Russel, they fulfil the function of the cosmic centre of society, reifying such concepts as succession and lineage.[14]

While the notions of generation's continuity and its inexorable decomposition pervade the collectivity of Hardy's output, they are particularly compelling in this narrative, and the paradoxical struggle enacted between the two notions is reflected through the characterisation of the setting. Therefore, the Hintock woodland seems essentially at variance with the ordinarily construed temporal plane, for it simultaneously defies and complexifies the idea of continuation. This curious quality can be observed in the scene where Grace and Winterbourne are sauntering through the forest, observing how,

> [a]lthough the time of bare boughs had now set in there were sheltered hollows amid the Hintock plantations and copses in which a more tardy leave-taking than on windy summits was the rule with the foliage. This caused here and there an apparent mixture of the seasons; so that in some of the dells they passed by holly-berries in full red growing beside oak and hazel whose leaves were as yet not far removed from green, and brambles whose verdure was rich and deep as in the month of August.[15]

The passage may, therefore, inspire the impression that some parts of the Hintock woodlot display the ability to subvert the linearity of time, thus representing a space whose mythopoetical essence defines and subsequently upends the characters' conception of the past and the present. Indeed, the close-knit character of the community, warranted by the preternatural attachment to the land they jointly cultivate and inhabit, accounts for the depiction of the woods as a space remarkably conducive to unordinary happenings and which imposes upon its residents a suspension of rational thinking. This esoteric characteristic aligns with the sense of Hardyan trees as being imbued with an agency that assimilates them to human denizens, thus endowing both parties with the same life continuum.

This phenomenon is delineated with a particular distinctness through the character of John South and the bond that he believes he shares with an old elm that grows in his garden. Eventually, the bond becomes the source of South's acute apprehension, and as his health deteriorates, the man declares, 'the tree 'tis killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow. He'll come down upon us and squat us dead'.[16] The application of a personal pronoun in reference to a (supposedly) inanimate object testifies not only to the entrenchment of mystical beliefs that subliminally condition the locals' spatial responsiveness but also to how these beliefs abolish the biological discrepancies between trees and humans. Thus, as Peter Wohlleben points to the difficulty in establishing whether a cut tree is actually dead (and whether it is even still a tree)[17], one could interpret this story as a recognition of the idea that

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[14] C. Russel, p. 223.
[15] T. Hardy, p. 82.
[16] T. Hardy, p. 123.
[17] P. Wohlleben, p. 80.

plants are situated in the zone of indeterminacy between the living and the dead, and that those who share in its archaic principle will also be constrained to balance on the edge of extinction.[18] South's daughter, Marty, explains this pattern by emphasising the codependent nature of her father's relation to the elm, remarking how '[t]he 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'.[19] Contrastingly, Marty's use of an impersonal pronoun creates a perceptual disjuncture between her and her parent, further amplifying the sense that the man's idiosyncratic conviction sets him apart from other villagers, validating his position of being in some arcane manner 'chosen by the tree' and wholly subjected to its humanlike whims. Indeed, the denouement of this subplot, encapsulated by the scene of the old man's death – brought about by the shocking news of the elm's cutting-down – solidifies the impression that Hardy's trees are thoroughly individualized, exhibiting the ability to impinge upon human lives by regulating their pace to a disconcertingly visceral and decisive degree.

Another instance of the arbo-human commingling – a notion that is actively explored in the modern ecocritical discourse and that questions the anthropocentric criteria for agency by capitalising on biological affinities between the two species[20] – is embodied through the characters of Giles and Marty who, from the outset, are said to enjoy a truly otherworldly level of kinship with the trees they tend to. Thus, the descriptions of their interactions with the woodland contain vividly spiritual undertones, emphasising the level of engagement which endows the two woodlanders with an extraordinary environmental sensibility. As a result, Giles displays 'a marvellous power of making trees grow,' ensured by 'a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak or beech that he was operating on'.[21] Indeed, Winterbourne's care is said to confer to his fingers 'a gentle conjurer's touch'[22], resembling magical abilities that would befit a sorcerer. The line of distinction between himself and the surrounding forestry is rendered even flimsier in light of Winterbourne's physicality and the fact that he is said to smell and look

> like Autumn's very brother, his face being sunburnt to wheat-colour, his eyes blue as corn-flowers, his sleeves and leggings dyed with fruit-stains, his hands clammy with the sweet juice of apples, his hat sprinkled with pips, and everywhere about him that atmosphere of cider, which at its first return each season has such an indescribable fascination for those who have been born and bred among the orchards.[23]

Bearing in mind the pastoral influences that pervade Hardy's novel, an association with Silvanus, the Roman god of the countryside in the guise of the countryman,

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[18] M. Marder.
[19] T. Hardy, p. 133.
[20] E. Gowers, p. 103.
[21] T. Hardy, p. 93.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 94.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

who later evolved into a god of woodland pastures[24], appropriately suggests itself, validating Giles' patronic role in the woods, which is reflected through his demeanour and clothing. A similar connection could be made with regard to Marty, whose mystifying alliance with the trees extends to sensory perception. Hence, in the sequence describing the process of planting, Marty remarks upon the way the young pines 'sigh directly we put'em upright, though while they are lying down they don't sigh at all […] it seems to me […] as if they sigh because they are very sorry to begin life in earnest – just as we be'.[25]

One could wonder to what extent Marty's presumption is valid or whether it stems from the tendency to project human agency onto non-human entities. In fact, George S. Fayen cautions against construing the traces of personality displayed by the arboreal elements as a pathetic or consoling fallacy, and instead asserts that the search for familiar features and feelings in the landscape testifies to the need for mindful self-identification in a mindless universe.[26] However, the vagueness of the narrative lends itself to speculation, and the anthropomorphic qualities ascribed to the saplings could be seen as a testament to how Hardyan characters elide the confines of clear-cut categorisation as either human or non-human. Moreover, the arboreal emotiveness perceived by Marty testifies to the pervasiveness of animistic impulses which are embraced by the woodlanders and which could be defined as the act of extending the human self into the environment, consequently imbuing it with a certain life force.[27] Such an idea aligns with the notion of the ecological self, coined in 1973 by Arne Naess and explored by Deborah Bird Rose as a state of being materially embedded in specific places while remaining coessential with the universe. Thus, the emplaced ecological self is permeable, with place penetrating the body and the body slipping into place.[28]

From this perspective, one could associate Marty with the mythological figure of a hamadryad, for her immersion in the arboreal seems to occur on a profoundly organic, metaphysical level, engaging both her mind and body. This association gains plausibility given the young woman's introduction into the narrative, when the reader first pictures her by a wooden fire, with a bill-hook in hand and the hair whose abundance 'made it almost unmanageable' and whose shade 'was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut'.[29] Interestingly, Richard Folkard's characterisation of the mythical wood nymphs dovetails with Hardy's account, depicting them as having long flowing hair and bearing in their hands axes meant to protect the trees 'on the existence of which their own life depended'.[30] Thus, from the ideological standpoint, Marty's unique presence in the novel may be construed as a conduit for the fantastical

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[24] 'Silvanus', Encyclopedia Britannica, 12 July 2013, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Silvanus-Roman-god [accessed 27 December 2024].
[25] T. Hardy, pp. 94–95.
[26] G. S. Fayen, Jr. pp. 98–99.
[27] C.R. Nutt, p. 19.
[28] D.B. Rose, p. 312.
[29] T. Hardy, pp. 40–41.
[30] R. Folkard, pp. 74–75.

rhetoric which further feeds into the vision of the Hintock woodland as a oneiric space that transcends the conventional boundaries between myth and reality. Indeed, the theme of transcendence, realized through corporeal transformation into a part of the landscape, is eagerly entertained throughout the narrative, in particular in the scene of felling, in which Marty is seen 'encaged amid the mass of twigs and buds like a great bird, running her ripping-tool into the smallest branches, beyond the furthest points to which the skill and patience of the men enabled them to proceed'.[31]

In fact, the entire sequence constitutes one of the most emotive portrayals of the woodland, with its impressiveness relying precisely on the disconcertingly visceral confusion between the botanical and the human. Here, the anthropomorphic overtones not only challenge one's perceptions of reality, but also confer an aura of perturbation, equating the seemingly innocuous agricultural operation with the infliction of capital punishment, in the process of which

> [e]ach tree *doomed* to the flaying process was first *attacked* by Upjohn. . . . After this it was barked in its erect position to a point as high as a man could reach. If a fine product of vegetable nature could ever be said to look *ridiculous* it was the case now, when the oak stood *naked-legged*, and as if *ashamed* […] (emphasis mine)[32]

Thus, the powerful undercurrent of violence with which the description is shot through, exposes the fracture in the assumed unity between the sylvan realm and its dwellers, tainting the concept of arboreal kinship with the circumstances of agrarian exploitation.

Moreover, the sense of invasiveness of the woodlanders' practice is elevated by linguistic ambivalence, which is not confined to Hardy's narrative, but extends to the collective register and may be observed in such words as 'stump', 'limb', or 'trunk'. Tzachi Zamir examines this twofold meaning by drawing on one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies, *Titus Andronicus*, focusing on an explicitly graphic description of assault and mutilation, inflicted upon the daughter of the titular character, Lavinia. The passage in question recounts how the young woman is taken into a deep forest, where she is violently raped and has her hands and tongue cut off to ensure the anonymity of her oppressors. Although the sequence borders on the grotesque due to its hyperbolic presentation, Zamir perceptively remarks that, in the aftermath of the horrific attack, Lavinia is progressively described by other characters in vegetative terms, and the amputation of her arms is likened to the act of lopping tree branches that consequently reduces her to a pitiable hybrid vegetable-person.[33] Undoubtedly, the concept of assimilation between horticulture and violence, substantiated by the derision of Lavinia's 'stumps'[34], may also be detected in Hardy's narrative, although it is applied much more subtly. Thus, the distress presumably expressed by the thicket

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[31] T. Hardy, p. 166.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] T. Zamir, pp. 281–85.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 291.

as it is targeted by the woodlanders like an 'executioner's victim'[35] may be construed as a reaction to trees becoming stripped of their treeness and having their essential balance permanently disturbed. Hence, once they are barked and lopped, their mystique – like Lavinia's body – appears irrevocably mutilated, with their suspension between the arboreal and the human no longer inspiring reverence and fascination, but instead seeming pitifully awkward and graceless.

What may be of additional interest in the sequence of the felling is Hardy's distinction of the oak as the species that is subjected to these violent disfigurations. Curiously, in James George Frazer's *Golden Bough* the oak is similarly referenced, for its folkloric value is analysed in the context of the alleged groaning that it lets out when felled, as if it lamented each blow of the axe.[36] Although Frazer's seminal work was published three years later than *The Woodlanders*, the reference comes from John Aubrey's *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*[37], written in the second half of the seventeenth century but only published in its entirety in 1881, on the initiative of the Folklore Society. Considering Hardy's own immersion in folk studies – which is carefully and evocatively transposed into his work – and the fact that several members of the Society were his personal friends[38], one could speculate that at some point Hardy familiarized himself with Aubrey's text. Retaining the folkloric perspective, the author's decision to single out this particular species seems all the more suggestive in light of the contemporary characterisation of the oak as 'the strongest of all trees […] revered as the emblem of the Supreme Being by almost all the nations of heathendom'[39], whose 'sacred character […] still survives in modern folk-lore and a host of flowers which grace our fields and hedges have sacred associations from their connection with the heathen gods of old'.[40] Given this classifications, the scene of the felling acquires ideological overtones and could be likened to the act of undeification, for, by its end, the trees are shorn not only of their physical identification – i.e., of bark and branches – but also of the spiritual connotations which they carried in the human consciousness. Importantly, this demystification of nature may be interpreted in a twofold manner. On the one hand, it can function as a dialectic with Charles Darwin's intention to arrange all forms of human life within the same spectrum and establish a form of interspecies egalitarianism through language.[41] On the other, it assumes a more sombre tonality under which all creatures – humankind included – are reduced to automatons, conscious only of their suffering.[42] The former way of thinking is substantiated in *The Woodlanders* through glimpses that uncover how

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[35] T. Hardy, p. 166.
[36] G. Frazer, p. 62.
[37] J. Aubrey, p. 247.
[38] J. Dillion, p. 8.
[39] R. Folkard, p. 21.
[40] W.T. Thiselton-Dyer, p. 244.
[41] G. Beer, pp. 56–7.
[42] P. O'Neill, p. 68.

> [t]he Unfulfilled Intention, which makes life what it is, was as obvious as it could be among the depraved crowds of a city slum. The leaf was deformed, the curve was crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promising sapling.[43]

Importantly, were one to examine other passages in the novel where the humanescent qualities of the woodland are presented in the context of the cut-throat vying for survival, one would notice that the prevalent unifying thread which confirms the affinities between the Hintock forest and its denizens is the phenomenon of overpopulation. Indeed, the atmosphere of a squalid city slum and the 'creaking sound of two overcrowded branches in the neighbourhood […] rubbing each other into wounds'[44] intensify the aura of interindividual tension and align with the theories of Thomas Malthus, whose *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) greatly influenced Darwin's theory of natural selection.[45] Therefore, the Malthusian conception of necessity as 'that imperious and all pervading law of nature' under which 'the race of plants and the race of animals shrink' and from which 'the race of man cannot, by any efforts of reason, escape'[46] seems reflected in Hardy's notion of the Unfulfilled Intention which affects both human and arboreal actors in equal measure. Although the ideological underpinning of this term remains vague and, therefore, conducive to different interpretations, John Heaney's idea of ascribing its monistic connotations to the philosophy of Herbert Spencer proves pertinent.[47] Indeed, in his breakthrough essay from 1860, *The Social Organism*, Spencer delineates four structural parallels between the notion of society and living organisms, with one of them pertaining to the mutual dependence which the individual parts acquire over time and which eventually becomes 'so great that the activity and life of each part is made possible only by the activity and life of the rest' (272).[48] Hence, in light of this formulation, one may view the universal impactfulness of the Unfulfilled Intention as a testament to the metaphysical interconnectedness of all organic beings, which simultaneously amplifies the sense of union between the human and the botanical realm and – paradoxically – emphasizes the precariousness of their existence.

The implications of frangibility (or even disposability) of individual lives become especially emphatic in the latter part of the novel, namely in the poignant – albeit more implied than directly recounted – scene of Giles Winterbourne's agony on the forest floor. The sequence seems of particular import when regarded in the context of the pastoral setting, for it challenges and eventually dismisses the genre's thematic assumption about the inherent harmony between the human and the natural. According to Charles P. Segal, the pastoral at its origins was meant to present nature as an alluring and docile extension of human life rather than an actor in its own right,

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[43] T. Hardy, p. 83.
[44] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[45] P. R. Sloan, p. 263.
[46] T. Malthus, p. 2.
[47] J. Heaney, p. 526.
[48] H. Spencer, p. 272.

thus making it a vacuous vessel, constructed for the Alexandrian men of the city who sought a form of narrative escapism from their urban environment.[49] In Hardy's narrative, however, the patina of artificiality which marked the poetic landscapes – notably in the Romantic period – is permanently stripped, and the formerly coveted passivity of nature no longer acts as a tonic for its denizens but becomes their downfall. Moreover, as showcased by Giles's tragic fate, nature's unwillingness to heed human needs and provide comfort in moments of distress applies even to those whose devotion to the environment seemed to have granted them its quasi-mystical favour. Thus, the contrast of Giles's characterisation as 'Autumn's very brother'[50] to his punishing ordeal of 'the devilry of a gusty night in a wood'[51] demonstrates how none of the aspects of the outside world can be truly harnessed or propitiated, which, in turn, decisively upends the thematic conventions of the pastoral and – paradoxically – allows the narrative to reappropriate the tradition of the pastoral elegy.

This reappropriation becomes conspicuous in the passage recounting the aftermath of Giles's death, which bears all the hallmarks of the popular elegiac trope of nature's mourning, for it describes how

> [t]he whole wood seemed to be a house of death, pervaded by loss to its uttermost length and breadth. Winterborne was gone and the copses seemed to show the want of him; those young trees, so many of which he had planted, and of which he had spoken so truly when he said that he should fall before they fell, were at that very moment sending out their roots in the direction that he had given them with his subtle hand.[52]

This viscerally humanoid expression of grief could be then viewed as the forest engaging in (or at least longing for) a final unison with its late carer whose absence seems universally imprinted. Thus, the scene contains patent parallels with the narrative about Daphnis, a semi-divine shepherd after whose death 'the wild rock and woods […] voiced the roar of Afric lions'.[53] However, upon examining the conventions of the pastoral elegy, George Norlin distinguishes an important trope pertaining to the suspension and subversion of nature's usual course.[54] The undetectability of this trope in Hardy's account corroborates the inference that despite the apparent domestication through atavistic attitudes and topographical familiarity, the sylvan space is eternally at odds with the human experience and never bends to its favour. Indeed, about thirty pages later into the novel, one reads how '[i]t was an exceptionally soft, balmy evening for the time of year, which was just that transient period in the May month when beech trees have suddenly unfolded large limp young leaves of the softness of butterflies' wings'.[55] The dizzying abundance and beauty of the arboreal

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[49] C.P. Segal, p. 46.
[50] T. Hardy, p. 235.
[51] *Ibid.*, p. 335.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 353.
[53] Virgil.
[54] G. Norlin, p. 299.
[55] T. Hardy, p. 384.

realm, whose flourishing is of no lesser intensity after Giles's demise, positively dispels the notion of the factual kinship between Hardyan trees and Hardyan people. Moreover, Giles's fate exemplifies how human presence in the natural environment continuously teeters on the brink of dissolution and how, at root, the arboreal sphere is bound to remain both passive and impassive towards the suffering of its dwellers. Therefore, instead of letting his characters claim and eventually gain mastery over the landscape, Hardy's depiction of the Hintock woodland encapsulates a much more topical and realistic perspective, one that aligns with Matthew Arnold's emphasis on how 'Man must begin […] where Nature ends; | Nature and man can never be fast friends. | Fool, if thou canst not pass her, rest her slave!'.[56]

Adam Bede

Published in 1859 under the nom de plume assumed by Mary Ann Evans, *Adam Bede* is not only her literary debut but also – as Maurice Hussey indicates – a work in which the time scheme is most meticulously detailed.[57] Indeed, from the first paragraph, the reader is thrust into a temporally-specific location, namely 'the village of Hayslope, as it appeared, on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799'.[58] This precision appears all the more striking when compared to Hardy's narrative, where the only historical anchorage is provided through the reference to the Matrimonial Causes Act, passed in 1857.[59] Apart from this veiled allusion, *The Woodlanders* is disengaged from the traditional timeline and the time-related phenomena are reified solely in descriptions of arboreal matter being affected by seasons and elements. This not only aligns with George Henry Lewes's idea of life being wholly dependant on external factors[60], but it also underscores the conceptual role of trees as repositories of continuity (both human and botanical), consequently imbuing the woods with the sense of mystical apartness. In *Adam Bede*, the perception of time is similarly fashioned through interactions with the natural environment, but the quasi-metaphysical underpinnings of Hardyan woodland appear disregarded in favour of the emphasis placed on human engagement with the landscape, realized principally through agrarian practices. In this light, the 'domesticated' setting of Hayslope contradicts Mark Fisher's concept of the eerie, fundamentally tied up for him with questions of agency and the failure of presence, which is, in turn, epitomized by completely or partially emptied landscapes.[61] Thus, while the first lines of *The Woodlanders* paint a haunting picture of the 'forsaken coach road […] in the vicinity of some extensive woodlands'[62] (35), Eliot's account opens with the description of an animated carpentry workshop, where

[56] M. Arnold, p. 60.
[57] M. Hussey, pp. 116–17.
[58] G. Eliot, p. 17.
[59] S.M. Cretney, p. 33.
[60] G.H. Lewes, p. 435.
[61] M. Fisher.
[62] T. Hardy, p. 35.

> a scent of pine-wood from a tentlike pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall.[63]

Notably, the intermingling of the scent of plants with that of laboured wood suggests how arboreal matter is stratified and defined in the novel according to its potential purpose for the Hayslope community. From this perspective, Muir's dual characterisation of woodland as an environment and a resource invests trees with pronouncedly pragmatic and utilitarian connotations, which stand in contrast to Hardy's more arcane narrative, where the theme of agricultural exploitation aims to exhibit the blurring of the physical boundaries between the sylvan and the human.[64] Even by comparing the titles, *The Woodlanders* immediately underscores the role of the setting in negotiating the identity of the inhabitants, whilst Eliot's choice to resort to a character name heralds a more anthropocentric stance, one that does not denote any connection to arboreal practices and that may indirectly imply the precedence of the labourer over the land.

Although the undertones of the landscape imagery differ in the two novels, they are described with the same level of precision. Indeed, as Alain Barrat points out, the dazzling lusciousness of foliation, as well as the minute details about the vegetation's vitality, shape and position, not only tap into the Victorian nostalgia for a pre-industrial rural setting but also testify to Eliot's preoccupation with realism, largely inspired by John Ruskin.[65] Her scrupulousness becomes evident when one analyses an extended passage about the characteristics of different tree species, included in the notes compiled by the author in anticipation of the writing process.[66] As a result, the novel is ripe with depictions of 'hanging woods, divided by bright patches of pasture or furrowed crops, and not yet deepened into the uniform leafy curtains of high summer, but still showing the warm tints of the young oak and the tender green of the ash and lime'.[67] In fact, arboreal imagery – including both botany and woodwork – is so seamlessly interwoven into the novel's fabric that, paradoxically, its presence may seem less conspicuous than that of the sylvan realm surrounding Little Hintock. This is because, unlike Hardy's pines, oaks and elms, Eliot's trees – at least superficially – do not exert any otherworldly influence on human characters, and the connection between the two relies more on economic than spiritual gains. Nevertheless, there are instances when arboreal references seem to function as markers of the characters' embodied knowledge while defining their construals of reality. This, in turn, aligns with Muir's specification of the woodland communities as independent, both from the economic and the behavioural point

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[63] G. Eliot, p. 17.
[64] R. Muir, p. 217.
[65] A. Barrat, pp. 9–10.
[66] J. Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot's Notes for* Adam Bede, pp. 147–48.
[67] G. Eliot, p. 29.

of view, for, 'when they spoke their minds, there were fewer ears to hear them, when they worked, there might be none watching'.[68]

The idiosyncratic nature of these attitudes, as well as their generational entrenchment in the minds of the Hayslope people, is most explicitly demonstrated in the scene preceding the death of Thias (Adam Bede's father), during which the titular character hears an ominous rapping at the door in the middle of the night. The sense of foreboding is elevated not only by the fact that the rapping turns out to be disembodied but also because this 'smart rap, as if with a willow wand'[69] is quickly recognized by Adam as an omen of death. Thus, after having inspected the whereabouts of the house only to find it devoid of any human presence to which the rapping could be attributed, the carpenter 'could not help a little shudder, as he remembered how often his mother had told him of just such a sound coming as a sign when some one was dying'[70]. The integration of the sylvan sphere into the folkloric overtones is achieved here through the mention – albeit rather cursory – of the type of wood the pretended wand is made of, namely the willow. Importantly, were one to examine the occult associations attached to this tree, one would discover how its identification in the passage not only intensifies the sinister aura of the scene but also enhances the fatefulness of the fact that, in the build-up to the peculiar incident, Adam is described working on a coffin. Indeed, Richard Folkard emphasizes how, '[t]he Willow seems from the remotest times to have been considered a funereal tree and an emblem of grief,' and how '[t]he Willow wand has long been a favourite instrument of divination'.[71] Moreover, the validity of the sepulchral connotations is corroborated through how the sequence unfolds and eventually reaches its climax the following morning, with the discovery of the body lying in a nearby brook, 'sticking against the willow'.[72] Thus, the willow acquires a twofold existence in the passage, initially serving as an aniconic conduit of the folkloric rhetoric and eventually acting as a reification of grief that the titular character is bound to face, both literally and figuratively.

Considering Eliot's formidable familiarity with Greek mythology[73], it is not amiss to venture a narrative connection between the discussed event and the theme of arboreal transformation, which is particularly prominent in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and which – as Artemis Archontogeorgi establishes – runs the gamut of causes, including grief.[74] One of the examples of exploring the concept of mourning through interspecific transmutation pertains to the story of Cyparissus, whose turning into a cypress tree – performed by his lover Apollo – eternalizes the process of grieving for the beloved stag that he accidentally killed. Ovid's vivid account delineates how—'his blood discharged among endless tears, his limbs began to turn to a shade of green,

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[68] R. Muir, pp. 201–03.
[69] G. Eliot, p. 58.
[70] *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.
[71] R. Folkard, pp. 586–87.
[72] G. Eliot, p. 61.
[73] J. Wiesenfarth, *The Greeks*, p. 91.
[74] A. Archontogeorgi, p. 5.

and his hair that a moment ago hung over his pale forehead, became a bristling crown, and he stiffened to a graceful point gazing at the starry heavens'.[75] Although the two texts differ significantly – also in terms of the tree species around which the narrative is focalized – they resemble each other in the idea of grief becoming externalized, which creates the impression of paradoxical continuity between human consciousness and the landscape, thus questioning the seemingly inherent insentience of the natural surroundings.

One could further the analysis of the ideological implications that are evoked by the willow hovering over Thias' waterlogged body and set it in the ethnographic context of trees as representatives and embodiments of a dead man's soul, exhaustively explored by Grant Allen in *The Evolution of the Idea of God*, where one reads that 'whatever comes up or out of a grave is counted as representative of the ghost within it'.[76] Thus, the wraithlike presence of the willow, at first confined to an auditory impression and then given concrete figural imagery, solidifies the consistency of the storyline while simultaneously extending the status of the arboreal beyond the industrial-centric aspect of resource consumption. Consequently, the specific tree is unwittingly invested by Adam with a darker spiritual meaning, and one learns that although he 'was not a man to be gratuitously superstitious […] to his dying day he bated his breath a little when he told the story of the stroke with the willow wand'.[77] The fact that the scene, as well as the impact it left on the titular character, are recounted no later than in the fourth chapter lends credence to the assumption that from the outset, the arboreal is given the power to enact narrative confluences and enhance the characters' sense of presence in the world. In other words, the characters' innate tendency to gauge the value of trees through the prism of their economic utility (which, in turn, leads to their being viewed as natural resources rather than botanical specimens) does not reduce the potency of arboreal imagery and the primal figurative meanings it carries.

Moreover, as noted by Barrat, the description of sylvan vegetation not only serves to delineate the topography of the setting (through such names as The Holly Bush or the Crab-tree Meadow), but it also indicates the characters' immersion into rural life and their attitude to social integration.[78] In this context, it is apposite to revoke the characterisation of the eponymous hero, whose arboreal attunement resembles that of Hardy's woodsman, Giles. Although the use of this trait is more conservative in Eliot's case, it nevertheless distinguishes the hero and endows him with an idiosyncratic acuteness of the senses, by which 'Adam delighted in a fine tree of all things; as the fisherman's sight is keenest on the sea, so Adam's perceptions were more at home with trees than with other objects'.[79] Indeed, the fact that his perception of reality is filtered through arboreal associations can be exemplified

[75] Ovid, p. 266.
[76] G. Allen, p. 139, 148.
[77] G. Eliot, p. 59.
[78] A. Barrat, p. 11.
[79] G. Eliot, p. 284.

by the passage in which the carpenter – in allusion to his recently widowed mother – defines the grief of old people as a state in which 'the new spring brings no new shoots out on the withered tree'.[80] Yet again, the interpersonal experience of grief provides narrative opportunities for the theme of interspecific transcendence, and the forest realm serves to Adam as a landmark that allows him to relate to his surroundings in both spatial and emotional sense. What is more, the character's impulse to liken the circumstances of grieving to an evocative figure of a withered tree corroborates the inherent connection between the aesthetics of grief and arboreal matter, whose static imagery lends itself to a reification of mourning as a form of metaphorical truncation.[81]

Interestingly, the peculiar alliance enjoyed by Adam with the plants he fashions into woodwork is corroborated by his physique, characterized by Mrs Bede as 'tall an' upright like a poplar-tree'.[82] Once more, Eliot's choice of this particular species proves relevant if one were to consider the poplars' prestige as a republican emblem during the French Revolution of 1848, when they were glorified as Trees of Liberty – possibly due to the phonetic resemblance between the words 'poplar' and 'people' – and endowed with an imposing and triumphant aura.[8384] Thus, Adam's pillar-like stature covers both physical and figurative scope, and his eventual appointment as a steward of Arthur Donnithorne's forest estate encapsulates his status as the intermediary between the human and the sylvan strata. This aspect is also remarked upon by Hetty Sorrel, from whom one learns how the young man 'who carried such authority with all the people round about […] knew, with only looking at it, the value of the chestnut-tree that was blown down'.[85] Considering that already in the seventeenth century, the chestnut was dubbed the most sought-after by carpenters and joiners[86], the author's preference for this species reaffirms Adam's craftsmanship, which in turn underscores the submissiveness of the woodland to forestry practices reflected in the tree's horizontal position. Moreover, the mention of this specimen's value further anchors the arboreal sphere of the novel to the concept of economic utility and the monetisation of the landscape, thus echoing – however faintly – the ongoing ramifications of the industrial revolution, which the author could witness in her time. One may, therefore, wonder whether the juxtaposition of the ever-luscious vegetation of the characters' rural homeland with the barren wasteland of Stonyshire, 'where the trees are few, so that a child might count them'[87], could be suggestive of the looming possibility of resource depletion.[88] However, the supposed intimation is never directly addressed in the narrative, and the fertility of the Hayslope-scape

[80] *Ibid.*, p. 165.
[81] T. Zamir, pp. 284–85.
[82] G. Eliot, p. 54.
[83] R. Folkard, p. 503.
[84] F. Stafford, p. 130.
[85] G. Eliot, p. 102.
[86] J. Evelyn, p. 45.
[87] G. Eliot, p. 45.
[88] A. Barrat, p. 11.

appears sustained and preserved through the pastoral overtones of the novel, best encapsulated by the depiction of the Fir-tree Grove.

Identified by Michael Squires as the customized equivalent of the *locus amoenus*, the Grove redefines the novel's relationship to the traditional pastoral by infusing it with notions of morality which are – importantly – prompted by trees that grow there.[89] Therefore, while the initial impression borders on the fantastical and the 'delicious labyrinthine wood' – chosen by Hetty and Arthur as a hideaway in which they fulfil their amorous attraction – seems 'just the sort of wood most haunted by the nymphs'[90], the location eventually conflicts with the characters, once they have benefited from its beguiling intimacy. Consequently, the Grove is no longer haunted by otherworldly entities – whose presence in itself is designated by Folkard as a defining feature of Sacred Groves of Ancient Greece[91] – but rather it becomes inhabited by Arthur's 'evil genius,' which makes him dread the nearby beeches and smooth limes, making him believe that 'there was something enervating in the very sight of them'.[92] Extending Squires's observation about the trees standing in for Arthur's sentimental volatility and thus functioning as a mirror of his nature[93], one could view their unsettling presence in the passage as an effect of the transposition of Arthur's guilty conscience onto the natural surroundings, and therefore as a morally-grounded variation of pathetic fallacy. From this perspective, the arboreal assumes the position of a silent but reproachful witness and may be associated with Arthur's subconscious effort to rectify his transgressions. However, the manner in which the sequence concludes – namely, with the man's eventual safe exit from the thicket and his swift return home – creates a stark contrast with the weight of consequences reserved for the female party of this relationship.

Indeed, as the story progresses, Hetty realizes that she is carrying Arthur's baby, and her despair disrupts the bucolic atmosphere of the setting once the reader discovers that 'behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish—perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame'.[94] The young woman's failed efforts to conceal her state and to reunite with her oblivious lover confirm Hetty's anticipated characterisation as a social outcast, which, in turn, complies with the quintessentially Victorian trope of the fallen woman. Nevertheless, as Deborah Anna Logan remarks, Hetty deviates from this literary convention in that she is not redeemed by any of the usual means (such as celibacy, maternity, transportation, or death), and her fallenness seems to stem from the lack of 'maternal instinct' rather than from illicit sexuality.[95]

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[89] M. Squires, pp. 670–72.
[90] G. Eliot, p. 178.
[91] R. Folkard, pp. 76–77.
[92] G. Eliot, p. 140.
[93] M. Squires, p. 672.
[94] G. Eliot, p. 347.
[95] D.A. Logan, p. 93.

Importantly, the critical point of her incompatibility with the notion of motherhood is reached against an arboreal background, when Hetty's final fit of desperation drives her to forsake her newborn baby under a tree, where it eventually dies of exposure. The act, for which Hetty is convicted and at first sentenced to hang, is recounted in vivid details. The young woman confesses how the sight of 'a hole under the nut-tree, like a little grave' solidified her resolution to abandon the child and 'cover it with the grass and the chips'.[96] The scene's poignancy is not lessened by the fact that it is recounted indirectly but rather amplified by the sense of stark contrast between the naturalness of the setting – i.e., the wood – and the 'unnaturalness' of the crime itself.[97] However, upon re-examining the pastoral aspects of the novel, Hetty's apparently instinctual equation of the sylvan sphere with a resting place no longer strikes one as incongruent, but, instead, it confirms Nikolas Dimakis's notion of deathscapes in Ancient Greece, according to which various features of the natural landscape – like trees, herbs, and shrubs – were associated with death by functioning as substantial parts of the burial ritual or by being involved in other ritual practices.[98] Moreover, the character's immediate recognition of the nut-tree's grim utility underscores the exploitative lens through which the sylvan sphere is viewed in the novel, and it additionally infuses this specific specimen with a proleptic quality, for by pointing to its eventual employment – namely, as the site of a crime – it presupposes human agency as encoded within non-human elements.

In the end, while the culprit's sentence is at the last minute commuted to transportation and the woman is spared from the figurative hanging tree, she initially remains haunted by sylvan imagery, specifically by what she defines as 'that place in the wood where I'd buried the baby'.[99] Subverting Josephine McDonagh's assessment of child-murder as a component of disciplinary narrative that establishes the boundaries between the barbarous and the civilized, as well as those between the animal and the human[100], one could perceive Hetty's mental confusion as a result of the dissolution of the cognitive boundaries between the arboreal and the personlike, a phenomenon that evokes Grant Allen's theory on the mythical connection between the tree and the dead buried beneath it.[101] Indeed, the forest figures in the character's mind as a relentless reminder of the infanticide, consuming her senses until she confesses her guilt to her cousin and shows repentance. From this moment forward, the arboreal loosens its psychological grip on Hetty as it seems to have fulfilled its moral obligation. One, therefore, notices how the arboreal presence in Eliot's novel is conditioned by its potential usefulness to human characters, which can either refer to the trees' material value as a resource or to their ideological function, meant to highlight and revise the characters' construals of ethics.

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[96] G. Eliot, p. 430.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 414.
[98] N. Dimakis, p. 35.
[99] G. Eliot, p. 431.
[100] J. McDonagh, p. 246.
[101] G. Allen, p. 140.

Conclusion

Having analysed the two novels in the context of the intensity at which the arboreal and human narratives intermingle, I wish to return to the idea suggested in the introduction of the article, namely: stories about trees are, at heart, stories about people. Indeed, both Hardy's and Eliot's manner of steering the narrative demonstrate how the characters' sense of self is mediated through the interactions with the elements of the landscape, and with trees in particular. Moreover, one may observe the authors' intention to transform Hintock and Hayslope into bucolic enclaves, in which the trees assume a vital, albeit paradoxical function, as markers of the setting's insubordination to the linearity of time and as repositories of the community's continuance. The mysticism of the location – which in Hardy's case is additionally amplified by historical ambiguity – is in both texts embodied by figures whose striking sensibility to the arboreal sphere is reminiscent of qualities ascribed to sylvan deities. However, the presumed pastoralness of the scenery is disrupted by the characters' suffering, to which the unimpressed landscape acts as a foil, emphasising the pathos of their fate. Moreover, by depicting the landscape as an archive of human misfortune, Hardy and Eliot subvert the initial idyll of the setting, ascribing to the arboreal sphere such notions as morality and death, and consequently defying the passivity of trees in their narratives. Indeed, were one to reassess the potential proof of kinship existing between the sylvan scenery and the inhabitants in the discussed novels, one would realize that the climax is reached through the idea of the person's fusion with the arboreal. This fusion becomes unsettlingly literal and entails fatal consequences, for Giles perishes in the aftermath of the stormy night spent on the forest floor, and Hetty's child dies under a nut-tree, left to the mercilessness of the elements.

To substantiate the poignancy of the evoked examples, I would like to conclude by referring to another episode that demonstrates the intensity at which the tree-like and the person-like can intermingle and even become confused in the collective conscience. Such is the case of the so-called Bella in the Wych Elm, an unidentified female whose remains were found in 1943 in one of the West Midland woods, crammed into a hollow tree trunk. Since the mystery regarding the woman's identity (or the circumstances of her demise) was never unravelled, the lore that grew around the victim not only provided her with a substitute name but also permanently fused the only tangible aspect of her person – i.e., her body – with the elm that withheld it. This comes off as particularly explicit when looking at the pictorial visualisations of the case, in which the encasement of the deceased in the trunk reaches a virtually organic degree, with her body either aesthetically intact (as if preserved by sapwood) or lurking in the hollowed bark in the form of a skeletal spectre. Thus, the merged outlines of 'Bella's' physicality with the arboreal elements in pictorial representations reflect the degree to which one's existence may branch out through the workings of various narratives, be they oral or written.

Importantly, the same kind of figurative ramification occurs in Hardy's and Eliot's novels, where trees expose the perishability of human bodies, while also defying it by enabling the bodies to live on through the workings of their realm. Thus, in the

aftermath of Giles's death, the woodland appears to retain – however fleetingly – the memory of Giles, for '[t]he crash of a felled tree in the depths of the nearest wood recalled the past …and all the homely faithfulness of Winterborne'.[102] A similar reference – although much more ghoulish in its overtones – is evoked in Eliot's novel, where Hetty confides how she is haunted by the sound of her crying baby and 'the place in the wood' where she buried it.[103] As such, the union with the sylvan sphere is most fully realized in the outcome of death, and while, at first glance, trees appear subdued and industrialized through woodwork practices, by the end of the two works, they affirm their status as fully fledged components of the plot, serving as a powerful catalyst for human remembrance, be it nostalgic or traumatic.

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Abstract

Of Trees and Men. Arboreal Kinship in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*

Beginning with the assumption that stories about trees are, at heart, stories about people and that arboreal elements carry the sense of community identity – thus becoming engaged in a rich dialectic with humans – the article explores the notion of arboreal kinship as portrayed in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. Focusing on these works, I showcase how trees act as an essential framing element of both plots, one that not only enacts various narrative collisions but also provides the characters with vital identitarian anchorage, consequently enhancing their presence in the text through associations with folklore and memory. Thus, I emphasize the mythopoetical function which the sylvan realm fulfils in the two works, as well as the tangible influence it exerts on its denizens. Indeed, by characterising the treescape as a seat of tensions which impinge on the human mind as well as on the body, I demonstrate that the narrative interactions between the two entail the characters' dissolution, which in both novels corresponds to death. Arboreal kinship is thus stamped with paradox, for it simultaneously constrains and expands the concept of the human presence within the landscape, exposing the perishability of the body while also indicating its vicarious persistence through arboreal narration.

Keywords

Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, trees, arbospaces.