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Victorian Studies, Volume 58, Number 4, Summer 2016, pp. 696-718 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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Dendrography and Ecological Realism

ELIZABETH CAROLYN MILLER

In his essay “The Dorsetshire Labourer,” originally published in *Longman’s Magazine* in 1883, Thomas Hardy reflects on the changing mode of life for agricultural workers in his home district and emphasizes a new kind of rootlessness. He describes this detachment from place by means of a metaphorical contrast with the roots of a tree: “a result of this increasing nomadic habit of the labourer is, naturally, a less intimate and kindly relation with the land he tills than existed before enlightenment enabled him to rise above the condition of a serf who lived and died on a particular plot, like a tree.” This new rootlessness is clearly double-edged, as the reference to serfdom suggests, but what is lost, in Hardy’s estimation, is closeness with the land: “They have lost touch with their environment” (263). Words such as “intimate” and “touch” suggest communion by way of physical proximity, a material connection such as that between the root system of a tree and the land it cleaves to.¹

Hardy’s use of the tree to think broadly about the human connection to the natural environment is even more apparent in his second novel, *Under*

ABSTRACT: The term *dendrography* here describes a form of ecological realism that strives to inhabit the scale and perspective of the arboreal. While a tree embodies bioregional rootedness, it also reaches up into the atmosphere, often obtaining a height and distance from the earth that exceeds the scale and duration of the human. Dendrography thus attempts to move away from the individuated human life that is primary in most nineteenth-century realisms. Thomas Hardy’s second novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), attempts just such a dendrographic reach from the perspective of the regional novel, and yet, it is simultaneously a study of the limitations of human perception and representation in the face of an ecological medium of which we are also a dialectical part.

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the Greenwood Tree (1872). The novel is set in the 1840s in Mellstock, a fictional mirror of Hardy's home village of Stinsford, Dorset.² Like "The Dorsetshire Labourer," and indeed like much of Hardy's work, the novel explores the demise of traditional rural modes of life under the pressures of modernity. However, its representational ambitions reach beyond and around this story of human change, in that its mode of fictional realism is conspicuously reliant on the non-human tree and plant life that overhangs and coproduces the human lives of the novel. The novel is thus worth returning to, now, amid broader conversations about the role of the non-human within Victorian literature and more specifically within Victorian realism.

The novel's eponymous final chapter, for example, depicts a time-honored wedding celebration ritual beneath an "ancient tree" in nearby Yalbury Wood, where the villagers enjoy "music, dancing, and the singing of songs" under the shade of the tree and "the older persons [sit] in a group under the trunk of the tree" (173). While the tree, along with the wedding celebrated beneath it, would appear to signify continuity and rootedness, the end of the novel suggests instead that the newly wed couple will be one of the last to enact the village's old nuptial traditions.³ And yet the tree persists, quite apart from its symbolic role in human social ritual, not so much rooted to a place as coproducing and provisioning a place in concert with other beings. The tree is

horizontally of enormous extent, though having no great pretensions to height. Many hundreds of birds had been born amidst the boughs of this single tree, tribes of rabbits and hares had nibbled at its bark from year to year, quaint tufts of fungi had sprung from the cavities of its forks, and countless families of moles and earthworms had crept about its roots. (173)

From the perspective of generations of moles and earthworms, this single tree takes on the magnitude of a whole world, and, next to the short lives of the "tribes of rabbits" and other small animals, the tree occupies a sublimely long timescale.

Set in such close proximity to the magnitude and scale of the tree, the human drama beneath it is transformed in scope as well. Indeed, while the novel skips over the marriage ceremony in the parish church that ostensibly concludes its courtship story, it lingers over the wedding party en route to the church, dwarfed by the "dark perpendicular firs" that hang above "like the shafted columns of a cathedral" (171). If the vaulted, high ceilings of church and cathedral architecture reinforce the smallness of the individual within a wider, supra-human scale, the trees in Hardy's novel produce a similar effect. As the novel's title reminds us, the trees of *Under the Greenwood Tree* always

hang above the human characters, diminishing their stature and positioning them within a broader framework of ecological representation.⁴ To be “under” the tree is not so much to be subordinate to the tree as to coexist inescapably in the same medium as the tree. In this way, Hardy’s novel attempts a form of ecological realism that I will call *dendrography*, or “tree writing”: a realism that strives to incorporate the trace and perspective of the arboreal even as it recognizes the impossibility of this task.⁵

Novels of Character and Environment

In his 1912 reissue of the novel, Hardy categorized *Under the Greenwood Tree* as the earliest of what he called his “novels of character and environment.” To focus on character rather than plot was a defining feature of realism in Victorian literary discourse—as Anthony Trollope explained in his well-known distinction between the realist and the sensation novel, “readers who prefer [realism] are supposed to take delight in the elucidation of character. They who hold by [sensation] are charmed by . . . plot” (227)—but Hardy’s emphasis on “environment” in the context of a claim for realism was more unusual, and indicates the significance of ecological representation within his conceit.⁶ The “and” in Hardy’s formulation—“novels of character and environment”—is also crucial in that it suggests his novels’ dialectical approach to human characters, the environment in which they live, and the complex, reciprocal relationship between them.

Hardy’s pursuit of what we might call an environmental realism was not lost on contemporary reviewers at the time of the novel’s publication. In the *Saturday Review*, Hardy’s friend Horace Moule described *Under the Greenwood Tree* as “filled with touches showing the close sympathy with which the writer has watched the life, not only of his fellow-men in the country hamlets, but of woods and fields and all the outward forms of nature” (43). The novel has, he said, “the genuine air of the country breathing throughout it” (45). In his 1896 reissue of the novel, Hardy likewise identified *Under the Greenwood Tree*, ex post facto, as the first of his Wessex novels, the retrospective beginning of a larger project of bioregional representation. Here the land itself would be the series’ through-line and its lead (fig. 1).⁷ Although Hardy did not write *Under the Greenwood Tree* with the Wessex scheme in mind, the novel anticipates the trajectory of the series in conceptualizing key problems of ecological representation in terms of realism, regionalism, and scale.

Like the other Wessex novels that would follow, *Under the Greenwood Tree* represents a specific regional environment with a sense of intimate



Fig. 1. “Map of the Wessex of the Novels and Poems,” by Emery Walker, from *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1912): n.p.

particularity. Given its attention to place and rootedness, it could be said to embody a bioregional ethic, one that imagines the environment by way of autochthonous familiarity—similar to the roots of a tree. The delimited scale of bioregionalism has fostered much productive thinking and feeling about ecology since the term was coined in the 1970s, but more recent critics have been attentive to the conceptual shortcomings of bioregionalism, which are particularly notable when considering environmental questions from a postcolonial, global, or anti-capitalist perspective. As Rob Nixon writes in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), a bioregional ethic can “help ground our sense of environmental responsibility” yet “poses certain problems” (238), too: a kind of “spatial amnesia,” Nixon says, “often attends a bioregional ethic. . . we have a history of forgetting our complicity in slow violence that wreaks attritional havoc beyond the bioregion or the nation” (239). Taking seriously the import of such a critique for a regional novelist like Hardy, I want to suggest, at the same time, that there is more than one vector along which we might measure a work’s outward reach.⁸ Jason Moore has recently argued in *Capitalism and the Web of Life* (2015)—a book that usefully frames capitalism as a “world-ecology” (3)—that criticism must “reconstruct historical objects. . . as co-produced by human

and extra-human natures" (23) and identify "new narrative strategies that go beyond the commonplace invocation of local-global connections" (24). In all its delimited localism and regionalist realism, Hardy's second novel is ambitiously dendrographic in its reach.

While a tree, as suggested earlier, might be taken as a figure of bioregional rootedness—embedded as it is in the soil, immobile, recording through its rings the seasonal and climatic fluctuations of a particular place over a long stretch of time—a tree also reaches up into the atmosphere, and often achieves a height and a distance from the earth that far exceeds the scale of the human. Focusing on the figure of the tree, I want to conceptualize Hardy's environmental realism in *Under the Greenwood Tree* as attempting such an outward reach from the perspective of the regional novel.

Such an approach, while not directly engaged with the pastoral, is influenced by a productive recent tendency in ecocriticism to reconsider the pastoral as a critical mode. Terry Gifford, for example, has identified a "post-pastoral" mode or impulse that is "not temporal but conceptual" and is "itself aware of the dangers of idealized escapism" (26). This idea undergirds Indy Clark's 2015 book *Thomas Hardy's Pastoral*, which argues that Hardy "does not abandon the literary conventions of the pastoral" but that "it is through the mode itself that Hardy questions its ideological functions" (2). These more recent formulations depart in crucial ways from the foundational work of Raymond Williams on the subject, and they put pressure on his dismissal of *Under the Greenwood Tree* as well. With its seasonal structure and other pastoral elements, Williams found in this novel "an external observation of customs and quaintness"—a cruder version of Wessex than we find in later masterpieces such as *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) or *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which successfully transcend pastoral "nostalgia" and go beyond the invocation of "the simple mysticism of nature" (*The Country* 203).⁹ More recent criticism of *Under the Greenwood Tree* has tended, in contrast to Williams's conclusions, to read its pastoral elements as elegiac, melancholic, or ironic, and to focus on the novel's realism.¹⁰

I want to take as a starting point, however, Williams's emphasis on "external observation" in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. For Hardy's novel is, I would suggest, at pains to demonstrate how questions of eco-representation are inexorably tied to questions of perception and mediation; and indeed, it is one of the premises of this analysis that environmental approaches to literature can profitably draw on media studies and vice versa.¹¹ Set in the decade that saw the birth of photography and published at a moment when the

definition of novelistic realism was under debate, *Under the Greenwood Tree* is a meditation on the very possibility of realistic representation of the natural world.

The term “realism” was first used in England in the 1850s, and as critics such as George Levine and Rae Greiner have shown, it was initially invested with a particular ethical responsibility and was not reducible to its efforts at accuracy. But by the time *Under the Greenwood Tree* was published in 1872, the influence of French naturalism was coloring British notions of realism, offering a realism that was ostensibly more real, more materialist, more accurate. An 1870 art review in *The Times*, for example, refers to a French painting’s “naked naturalism and absolute realization of grim fact” (“The Royal Academy Exhibition”). William Newton notes that “Hardy’s career as a novelist was almost exactly contemporaneous with the rise, flowering, and fading of French naturalism. The year 1871 saw the publication of both *Desperate Remedies* [Hardy’s first novel] and [Émile Zola’s] *La Fortune des Rougon*” (29). Richard Lehan also dates the onset of naturalism to 1871, the year before the publication of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, which underscores the instability of the concept of realism at the time Hardy is writing (3).

As a subset of literary realism, naturalism was fundamentally premised on a post-Darwinian recognition of the centrality of environment as a determining factor for human lives (fictional or otherwise).¹² Often, this manifested in a representation of seemingly inescapable social ills—what John Plotz has described as “an almost Hobbesian grimness about the determinative nature of both biological and social laws” (“Speculative Naturalism” 35)—but it had a crucial ecological valence as well. Naturalism moved realism toward ecological realism by locating the human squarely within the environment and by placing environmental limits on human agency. Hardy goes even further, however, by representing the relationship as reciprocal: the environment is determined by the human just as the human is determined by the environment.

More directly, *Under the Greenwood Tree* poses the representational questions at stake in the very idea of ecological realism. The novel explores realism as a problem of materiality and mediation, suggesting how inseparable realism’s project is from the difficult human task of perceiving, envisioning, and conceptualizing the natural environment. It demonstrates the extent to which ideation and materiality exist in productive tension within any realism, but in environmental realism in particular. Finally, it works to disclose the auratic and ideational qualities of realism—a literary mode that has more often been conceptualized as empirical—attempting, through the figure of

the tree, to capture both the material specificity of the ecological and the perceptive and scalar challenges of human attempts to represent it.

“To Dwellers in a Wood”

Walter Benjamin employs the concept of the “aura” in “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” as a primarily aesthetic term—“what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura” (22)—but natural objects, too, can have an aura: “What, then, is the aura? A strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be. To follow with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder is to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch” (23). The aura is impressionistic; it inheres in the perception of natural objects, such as a branch, rather than in the objects themselves.¹³

Under the Greenwood Tree is full of moments of misperception in which environmental materiality blends into the imaginary and vice versa. In one characteristic passage, the protagonist, Dick Dewy, catches sight of his beloved, Fancy Day, and in the fading light of dusk mistakes her for a tree:

upon the bright after-glow about the horizon was now visible an irregular shape, which at first he conceived to be a bough standing a little beyond the line of its neighbours. Then it seemed to move, and as he advanced still further there was no doubt that it was a living being sitting in the bank, head bowed on hand. The grassy margin entirely prevented his footsteps from being heard and it was not till he was close that the figure recognized him. Up it sprang and he was face to face with Fancy. (128)

Here, the narrator describes Fancy through Dick’s point of view in terms that cross the border of tree and human: she is “an irregular shape,” “a bough,” “a living being,” and a “figure,” until she finally emerges as “Fancy,” a name that itself suggests imagination above material embodiment and conveys Dick’s idealized perception of her. Such passages exploring the effects of light and atmosphere on visual perception occur frequently in the novel, and in fact, while Hardy’s much-discussed interest in Impressionism is usually considered more of an influence on his later novels, J. B. Bullen quotes Hardy as early as 1865 observing, “The poetry of a scene varies with the minds of the perceivers. Indeed, it does not lie in the scene at all” (11).¹⁴

Hardy’s novel is particularly interested in vision, and in fact the subtitle of the first edition was *A Rural Painting of the Dutch School* (fig. 2).¹⁵ As Ruth Yeazell has described in her book on Dutch realist painting and its influence

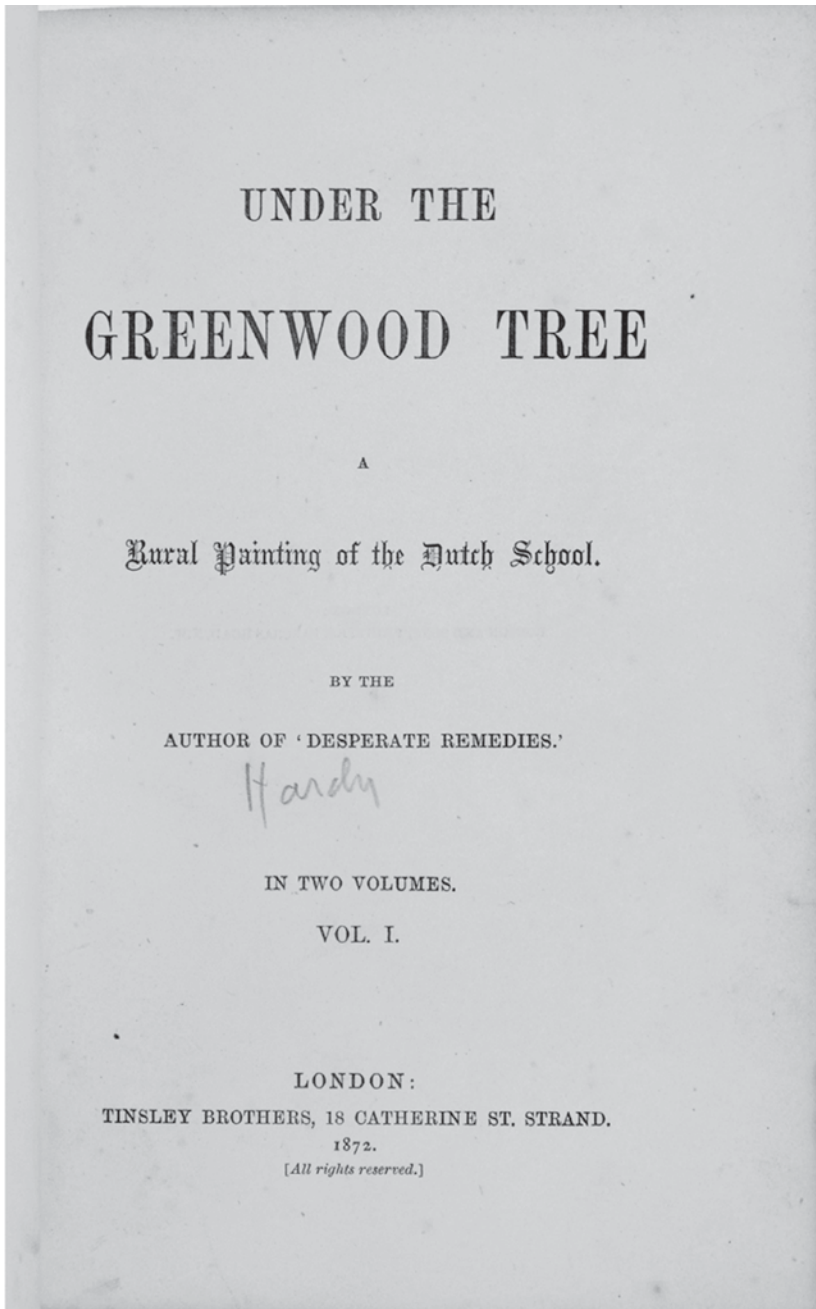


Fig. 2. Title page, *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy (London: Tinsley, 1872).

on Victorian realism, this style of painting functioned in nineteenth-century discourse as shorthand for precise verisimilitude before the ascension of photography: “Only when the photographic reproduction of the visible world began to take the place once occupied by the faithful mimesis of the painters,” Yeazell writes, “did the idiom of ‘Dutch painting’ gradually disappear from nineteenth-century rhetoric about the novel” (*Art* xvi). Hardy, however, still has recourse to this metaphor in his 1872 novel, published well after the rise of photography, and in this way evokes a mode of visual realism that pre-dates the technology of photography. His story is set in the 1840s—at a historical turning point for discourses of visual realism—when the Dutch school and its ilk would soon be edged out by photographic verisimilitude.

Gestureing in this way toward the broad problem of mimesis, *Under the Greenwood Tree* opens with five chapters that take place during one of the darkest nights of the year. Of course, darkness impedes visual perception as well as photography, and Hardy’s extended use of it in the opening chapters of the novel thus stakes out a non-visual ground for realistic representation. Indeed, while many accounts of nineteenth-century realism have conceptualized photography as a dominant visual model for the realist novel, Jennifer Green-Lewis has described Hardy’s disdain for photography’s “inability to be wholly truthful” (2-3).¹⁶ Even light itself—the author of the photograph—appears in Hardy’s fiction less as the bearer of enlightenment and more, as Yeazell puts it, “as the mobile agent of metamorphosis and illusion” (“Lighting” 64). If the word *photography* literally conveys the idea of “light writing,” Hardy’s opening chapters attempt a realism that is closer to *dendrography*, or “tree writing.”

While many scenes in *Under the Greenwood Tree* take place in conditions of low light, the opening chapters occur at night on Christmas Eve, not long after the winter solstice, when almost nothing is visible and there is no clear source of illumination. The moon, a waning gibbous, “had risen since the snow-storm; but the dense accumulation of snow-cloud weakened her power to a faint twilight which was rather pervasive of the landscape than traceable to the sky” (27). With low conditions of visibility, heightened perception of sound rather than sight becomes key, and the opening lines of the novel focus on the voices of the trees in the woods outside Mellstock and the legibility of the trees’ voices to the villagers who live among them:

To dwellers in a wood, almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock: the holly whistles as it battles with itself: the ash hisses amid its quiverings: the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality. (11)

The passage does not so much suggest that trees have voices—for the opening phrase, “to dwellers in a wood,” positions the whole passage in the context of human perception—as it suggests that those who live among the trees experience an intimate closeness with them that lends itself to fine distinctions in the perception of trees’ sounds. Individual features of the trees produce material distinctions in the way the wind blows through them, recognizable to the villagers and communicated to the reader by way of such onomatopoeic words as “sob,” “moan,” “whistle,” “hiss,” and “rustle.” In the dark, the trees appear visually merely “as black and flat outlines upon the sky” (11), yet the onomatopoeic sound words represent an effort—albeit an impossible effort—to cross the barrier of representation, to convey an unmediated effect, to produce the materiality of the rounded sound in the air of the reader, as the trees might have been heard to the villagers. Such an effort might appear to smack of what Timothy Morton disdainfully calls *ecomimesis*, a device in nature writing that attempts to “go beyond the aesthetic dimension altogether,” and “to break out of the normative aesthetic frame, go beyond art” (31). And yet, if *ecomimesis* implicitly says, as Morton puts it, “This environment is real; do not think that there is an aesthetic framework here” (35), Hardy’s passage mediates the tree sounds through the perceptive ear of their listener, Dick Dewy, as he walks through a “plantation” (11). Hardy’s use of this term, as well as “copsewood,” reminds us of the human hands that engineered the wood through which Dick is walking and, by extension, of the hand of the author who composed it: “Within the woody pass, at a level anything lower than the horizon, all was dark as the grave. The copsewood forming the sides of the bower interlaced its branches so densely even at this season of the year that the draught from the north-east flew along the channel with scarcely an interruption from lateral breezes” (11).

In this opening nocturne, Dewy is off to perform the traditional rounds of caroling late Christmas Eve night with other members of the Mellstock choir—a choir that will be forced out of the church in favor of a solo organist before the novel’s conclusion. The men gather in the darkness, visible only as silhouettes as if in “black cardboard” (12) with “no distinctive appearance beyond that of a human being” (13). Hardy offers us a realism that eschews visible human particularity. While the opening lines of the novel insist on the “individuality” of the trees in the wood, it is an individuality of *species* rather than specimen: “every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. ... And winter ... does not destroy its individuality” (11). The humans are represented in similar terms: the profile of one choir member features “an ordinary-shaped nose, an ordinary chin, an ordinary neck and ordinary

shoulders.” Nothing about this member of the human species is individuated, and “what he consisted of further down was invisible from lack of sky low enough to picture him on” (12). The man appears, as John F. Danby puts it, as if “buried waist-deep in the earth” (91): almost, that is, like a tree. As with the trees, the narrator emphasizes the men’s sounds in the dark: “the rustle of their feet and tones of their speech echoed with an alert rebound from every post, boundary-stone and ancient wall they passed” (27). Hardy represents the human characters in the same register as the trees, in species terms, producing the effect of an environmental realism rather than the effect of realist individuation.

The choir doesn’t know it yet, but this is the last time they will engage in their traditional rounds of Christmas caroling before the choir is disbanded, and the entire scene is weighted with looming obsolescence. In fact, while one might presume that a novel structured seasonally would operate according to a cyclical temporality, the novel’s beginning instead evokes tradition ending for good, just as the novel’s end focuses on the demise of the village wedding ritual. As they walk in the winter darkness, the carolers “lost their rotundity with the daylight, and advanced against the sky in flat outlines, which suggested some processional design on Greek or Etruscan pottery” (12). Like ancient figures on a relic from a lost civilization, they have few individual features. Hardy provides only the sparest visual reference points, blocking the reader’s visual perception of the men and preventing the kind of comprehensive identification that was a hallmark of nineteenth-century realist fiction.

A Phantom of the Light

If Hardy represents the choir in terms that resist visual individuation, consider in contrast the culminating vision of the novel’s opening nocturne, when Dick Dewy first catches sight of Fancy Day. Just as Jude first sees Sue in a photograph in *Jude the Obscure*, Dick first sees Fancy by means of visual conditions that mimic photography. Fancy has only just taken up a new post as schoolmistress, and in this spectacular scene of visual illumination, the choir begins to sing outside the schoolhouse in the dead of night. Fancy, sleeping upstairs, comes to the window: “an increasing light made itself visible in one of the windows of the upper floor.” The light stops, and “the blind went upward from before it, revealing to thirty concentrated eyes:—a young girl framed as a picture by the window architrave” (32). She was “unconsciously illuminating her countenance to a vivid brightness by a candle she held in her left hand, close to her face” and was “wrapped in a white robe of some kind,

whilst down her shoulders fell a twining profusion of marvellously rich hair in a wild disorder." Later, after she closes the blind again, "Her fair forehead and eyes vanished: her little mouth: her neck and shoulders: all of her. Then the spot of candlelight shone nebulously as before: then it moved away."

Fancy, whose very name suggests airy insubstantiality, appears in an upper-story window, at a distance from the choir below, outside in the dark night. The "nebulous" candlelight, made more gauzy by the effect of the blind, produces with the white robe an almost magical, immaterial glow, and the fleetingness of the vision, which vanishes after but a moment, conveys a sense of transient unreality. The effect of the scene, finally, is to bring visual fantasy into the domain of realism. After Fancy disappears, one member of the choir declares the glimpse to be "As near a thing to a spiritual vision as ever I wish to see!" Another, speaking in dialect, says, "If she'd been a rale waxwork she couldn't ha' been comelier" (32). Comparing her to a spiritual vision or, paradoxically, a "real waxwork," both comments register Fancy's auratic quality, one relying on the older trope of divine revelation and the other evoking the phantasmagoric world of modern commercial spectacle.¹⁷

Mystification is also implied by the original title for the chapter in which this scene occurs: "She was a Phantom of Delight."¹⁸ Hardy changed it to "The Listeners" before publication, laying subtle emphasis on that which can be heard rather than seen in the dark. Prior to this scene, *Under the Greenwood Tree's* readers have already been warned against the illusory effects of visual illumination: as the carolers approach Reuben Dewy's home in the dark of night before the caroling begins, "Light streamed through the cracks and joints of outbuildings a little way from the cottage—a sight which nourished a fancy that the purpose of the erection must be rather to veil bright attractions than to shelter unsightly necessities" (14). Use of the term *fancy* here, in reference to a falsely spectacular outhouse, prepares us to be suspicious of Fancy Day's own bright attractions, which are introduced shortly after in the scene at the window. Still, the effect of Fancy's illumination on Dick is mesmeric, as he is utterly transfixed, rooted to the ground like a tree: "Opposite the window, leaning motionless against a beech tree, was the lost man—his arms folded, his head thrown back—his eyes fixed upon the illuminated lattice" (35).

Under the Greenwood Tree's illuminated vision of Fancy at the window conveys the novel's interest in alienated perception within structures of representation that would seem to offer realism through human individuation. The day after the scene at the window, Dick sees Fancy again at a Christmas dance, where she is wearing "a gauzy dress of white" (46), echoing the white robe she wore in the window. As her dress suggests, and as the narrator repeatedly

makes clear, Fancy carefully cultivates an aura of immateriality. She is at pains not to “damage the airy-fairy nature that Dick, as maiden shrewdness told her, had accredited her with” (87). At their wedding at the end of the novel, Fancy transforms into an “apotheosized being” (168), but a guest astutely wonders “which she thinks most about, Dick or her wedding raiment” (171). The opening lines of the wedding chapter, meanwhile, focus on the raiment of the trees rather than the raiment of the bride: “The last day of the story is dated just subsequent to that point in the development of the seasons when country people go to bed among nearly naked trees, are lulled to sleep by a fall of rain and awake next morning among green ones: when the landscape appears embarrassed with the sudden weight and brilliancy of its leaves” (163). The chapter contrasts Fancy’s appearance of transcendent immateriality with “embarrassed” ecological materiality, but Hardy’s landscape, crucially, only “appears embarrassed”; the novel’s realism and its investments in representing the natural world are again mediated through human perception.

“Branches of the Same Tree”

Realism in the Victorian novel has typically been understood to accumulate objects to produce a sense of the real. Elaine Freedgood writes that “realism is responsible for representing social and individual experience as it really occurs in the world outside the novel” and “must do so through the most mundane, material means” (“Nineteenth” 326). In *The Ideas in Things* (2006), Freedgood examines the mechanisms by which readers can “brush by all kinds of things in novels, dismissing them with a brief and paradoxical acknowledgement” (10), ultimately concluding that “thing culture,” as opposed to “commodity culture,” “remained vibrantly extant well into the Victorian period” (150).¹⁹ The realism of *Under the Greenwood Tree* is, however, fundamentally dependent on the tree and plant life that frames and interpenetrates the novel’s human drama. Instead of “brushing past” all the trees in the narrative, Hardy’s representational strategy is to interweave them deftly with the human drama that they appear to frame, all while reminding us that they are fictive. Ultimately, this is a realism that produces a sense of the real not so much through things, or through individuated humans with psychological depth, as through the life of trees and the natural world.²⁰

Hardy frequently compares and associates the humans and the trees in his novel, thereby integrating the characters and their environment and suggesting their coevolution. The trees, as we have seen, dress up with Fancy in gorgeous raiment for her wedding day; the smallest and slightest of the men

in the choir is named Thomas Leaf; and William Dewy (Dick's grandfather who plays bass-viol in the choir) is metonymically invested with a weighty physical gravity by way of a proximate oak tree: "the setting sun . . . gave him a Titanic shadow at least thirty feet in length—stretching away to the east in outlines of imposing magnitude, his head finally terminating upon the trunk of a grand old oak-tree" (65). The narrator refrains from fully individuating William, who appears, like the trees and the other members of the choir, more as species than specimen: "to his neighbours he had no character in particular" (20).

Reciprocally, the novel's trees are depicted in human terms, as in one passage set in a storm:

The trees of the fields and plantations writhed like miserable men as the air wound its way swiftly among them: the lowest portions of their trunks, that had hardly ever been known to move, were visibly rocked by the fiercer gusts, distressing the mind by its painful unwontedness, as when a strong man is seen to shed tears. Low-hanging boughs went up and down—high and erect boughs went to and fro, the blasts being so irregular, and divided into so many cross-currents that neighbouring branches of the same tree swept the skies in independent motions, crossed each other, or became entangled. Across the open spaces flew flocks of green and yellowish leaves which after travelling a long distance from their parent trees, reached the ground and lay there with their under-sides upward. (139)

The trees' insecure attachment to the ground suggests the uprooting of the villagers, and the leaves' flight from their "parent trees" evokes the separation of families during this era of rural depopulation.²¹ And yet, even while the passage uses trees metaphorically to express something about human society, it also calls subtle attention to the way that trees in particular, and the natural world more generally, are erroneously represented as a stable, unchanging backdrop against which the drama of human life plays out. The "unwonted" movement of the trees is "distressing" precisely because it evokes the drama and the instability that likewise characterize the life of the natural world. Meanwhile, Hardy's use of the word "plantation" underscores what Moore has described as the deep and inextricable "bundling of human and extra-human natures" (42). In the critical method that Moore terms "world-ecology," nature's instability and the bundling of the human and non-human are always before us, such that "nature" is properly understood as "a *historical* relation" (291).²²

That *Under the Greenwood Tree* represents humans and trees in a similar register demonstrates its effort to conceptualize human life as thoroughly bundled with the ecosystem to which it belongs. Apple trees appear

frequently in the novel, for example, with the apple serving as a key figure of tree-human integration. In an early scene in which Reuben Dewy taps a keg of cider for the choir to enjoy on Christmas Eve, the cider symbolizes the interpenetration of the humans and the trees within the novel's environmental medium: "This in the cask here is a drop o' the right sort," Reuben tells fellow members of the choir, "'tis a real drop o' cordial from the best picked apples—Sansoms, Stubbards, Five-corners, and such-like. . . . And there's a sprinkling of they that grow down by the orchard—rails—streaked ones—rail apples we d'call 'em as 'tis by the rails they grow, and not knowing the right name. The water-cider from 'em is as good as most people's best cider is" (15). Scenes such as this underscore *Under the Greenwood Tree's* reliance on what I have called a bioregional ethic, one that imagines human relations to the environment in terms of proximate familiarity. (And the cider scene, in particular, reminds us that the present-day local food movement is a particularly influential outgrowth of bioregional thought.) Inside the barrel is the concentrated produce of trees so familiar that the cider drinkers know exactly where they grow ("rail apples"), but even here Hardy emphasizes the limited range of human perception in its encounter with the natural world. Because Reuben's wooden cider cask is rotting away, his first attempt at tapping the keg fails, and he asks Michael Mail to stick his thumb in the hole while Reuben gets another tap. Young Charley Dewy asks Michael, "Idd it cold inthide te hole?" which prompts his mother to say, "I lay a wager that he thinks more about how 'tis inside that barrel than in all the other parts of the world put together" (18).

Trees figure throughout the novel as a species counterpart to the humans that live among them and as a form of nonhuman life that inhabits a longer time scale than humans and achieves a greater height than humans, and thus, in some sense, assumes a wider and longer point of view.²³ This can be seen, for example, in the scenes that take place on footpaths. As a landscape feature, footpaths remind us of the thorough intertwining of human and arboreal life, and yet many of Hardy's passages depicting footpaths feature an elevated narrative perspective positioned at the tree canopy, above the humans rather than in the thick of them. In the "Going Nutting" chapter, Dick disappears into a winding footpath called Snail-Creep, which "sloped up a hill and entered a hazel copse by a hole like a rabbit's burrow. In he plunged, vanished among the bushes, and in a short time there was no sign of his existence upon earth save an occasional rustling of boughs and snapping of twigs in divers points of Grey's Wood" (128). In the chapter "Honey-Taking, and Afterwards," we again regard Dick from above the tree canopy as he treads a footpath in low light: "The evening advanced from sunset to dusk long before Dick's

arrival, and his progress during the latter portion of his walk through the trees was indicated by the flutter of terrified birds that had been roosting over the path" (130). We see the disturbed birds above the trees, but not Dick himself, traversing the footpath under the trees.

The elevated, distanced narrative viewpoint in these scenes—located at the height of the tree canopy, at a distance from the humans below—recalls Williams's critique of *Under the Greenwood Tree's* tendency toward "external observation." Anna Henchman has argued more broadly that Hardy's life-long interest in astronomy led him to use "a variety of literary techniques to bring the perceptual challenges posed by astronomy into everyday human experience" (44); she notes how, for example, in *The Return of the Native* (1878), "the narrator floats above, looking down upon the heath as if from the viewpoint of a star at some moments" (47). Likewise, Plotz describes Hardy's tendency across his novels "to leap upward from the microscopic to the sidereal and plummet earthward again with equal ease" ("Speculative" 43), a tendency that Plotz links to "naturalism's capacity to shift scales radically . . . bypassing individual human interiority as fiction's standpoint" (33). I want to connect these scalar effects to the broader problem of ecological representation in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Just as Hardy recognized that the "environment" is a crucial category for the realist novel, his use of scale in this novel is part of a formal strategy that I have called dendrography: an attempt to imagine a fictional viewpoint beyond the human.

Conclusion

What I am calling dendrography is, then, a form of ecological realism that strives to represent the natural world more accurately by inhabiting the scale and perspective of the arboreal. Such a perspective is wider, in the sense of obtaining a greater height and distance from the earth, as well as longer, in the sense of temporal duration. An arboreal scale can thus achieve a certain distance beyond the individuated human life at the center of most forms of nineteenth-century realism. This narrative form offers, then, a capacity to think of the human in species terms, in dialectical mutuality with the natural environment. And yet, crucially, this dendrographic mode stops short of claiming actual success in achieving such a wider perspective, reminding us instead of the mediated forms of human perception on which it depends.

If dendrography is, then, in some sense impossible, why does it matter now? Timothy Clark has argued that global capitalism and global climate change together necessitate a changed conception of scale in literary and

cultural criticism. The scale of literary criticism, Clark reminds us, is generally “that of a national culture and its inhabitants, with a time frame of perhaps a few decades, a ‘historical period’ of some kind” (100), despite the fact that “viewed on very long time scales, human history and culture can take on unfamiliar shapes, as work in environmental history repeatedly demonstrates” (101). In his new study of the rise of the fossil fuel economy in nineteenth-century Britain, Andreas Malm argues along similar lines that in environmental history today, given our present circumstances, “only a totality can be the object of interest” (4).

If global environmental crisis and its roots in global circuits of capital challenge us to rethink our critical scales, I want to suggest that Hardy’s first Wessex novel offers the figure of the tree as a symbolic model for thinking beyond the limited perceptive scale of the human. In one emotionally fraught scene, for example—the scene that culminates in Dick and Fancy’s engagement—Hardy employs trees to measure concrete time during an intensely felt drive home in Dick’s cart: “There was silence between [Dick and Fancy] till they had left the sea-front and passed about twenty of the trees that ornamented the road leading up out of the town towards Casterbridge and Mellstock. ‘Though I didn’t come for that purpose either, I would have done it,’ said Dick at the twenty-first tree” (106). The novel relies on the trees as a more accurate measure of narrative time than Dick or Fancy’s perception of temporality in this fervid moment.

If *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy’s first Wessex novel, is thus highly attuned to what the arboreal and the ecological have to offer an evolving fictional realism, the novel is also attuned to realism’s capacity for registering ontological slippage from material to ideational.²⁴ In the 1912 Wessex Edition of the novel, a frontispiece photograph with the caption “Mellstock Church” encapsulates this idea by presenting the ostensible trace of the novel’s fictional church in pseudo-indexical form, at a distance, behind a line of leafless trees (fig. 3). Through his attention here and elsewhere to the mediating effects of perception and to the trace as a representational effect, Hardy reminds us that *Under the Greenwood Tree* can never fully achieve the ecological realism or inhabit the arboreal perspective that it attempts.²⁵ As Levine writes, realism “always implies an attempt to use language to get beyond language, to discover some non-verbal truth out there” (6), but inevitably it illustrates “the difference between the medium and the reality whose absence it registers” (8). In this way, the aesthetic conundrum posed by realism is the same problem Morton identifies by way of the term “ecomimesis,” an indication of how the intractable problem of realism is inseparable from



Fig. 3. “Mellstock Church,” *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy (London: Macmillan, 1912): frontispiece.

the difficult human task of perceiving the “environment” that Hardy ascribed to himself in classifying *Under the Greenwood Tree* as a “novel of character and environment.” Dendrography is, then, a mode of ecological realism, but the reality that it uncovers is the fundamental structural limitation of human perception and human representation in the face of an ecological medium of which the human is also a vital part.

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NOTES

For input and feedback on the evolving argument of this piece, I would like to thank the Middle Modernity Research Group at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, especially Susan David Bernstein; my colleague Margaret Ronda; and the readers and editors at *Victorian Studies*. Managing Editor Mary Bowden kindly helped me obtain high-resolution versions of the images.

1. Cohen discusses the human-arboreal connection in Hardy as a means of addressing “what constitutes the Victorian tactile imagination” (1). By depicting how humans and trees “rub against each other” in *The Woodlanders*, Cohen argues, “Hardy emphasizes the material properties of people and the continuities between them and the worlds they inhabit” (19).

2. See Howard on Mellstock’s close resemblance to Stinsford.

3. The celebration under the tree is preceded by a march around the parish, and while the bride decides to follow village tradition in memory of her deceased mother, she maintains, “Respectable people don’t nowadays” (170).

4. Critics often discuss the literary quality of the novel’s Shakespearean title, but have overlooked that the title refers even more directly to trees. Keith, for example, writes that the title’s literary allusion “implic[s] sophisticated detachment” (103). Zeitler and Turner (30) also discuss the title in terms of literary rather than environmental reference.

5. “Dendrography” is a rhetorical term for “description of trees,” but in the early twentieth century it took on a secondary meaning to refer to the recording of tree growth by means of a dendrograph, “an instrument used to measure the periodical variations in the size of tree trunks.” Early versions of these instruments employed a pen, which would record the growth of the tree through an apparatus affixed to the trunk. These two definitions of the term—writing *about* trees and writing *by* trees—suggest the representational challenge at the heart of all of forms of eco-realism. See the OED definition.

6. See Kendrick for more on how the sensation/realist, plot/character divide influenced Hardy’s early novels. *Under the Greenwood Tree* establishes its meta-discourse around realism early on, when Reuben Dewy declares that a “coarse touch” (53) “do always prove a story to be true . . . all true stories have a coarse touch or a bad moral” (54).

7. Indy Clark notes, “The first published map of Wessex accompanied the article ‘Thomas Hardy’s Wessex’ in the debut edition of the *Bookman* from October 1891” (15).

8. See Duncan on Hardy and the regional novel.

9. For another view of nostalgia, see Harrison’s marvelous work of tree-criticism, which reads nostalgia as “keep[ing] open the vision of historical alternatives” (156). Harrison describes a form of modern nostalgia “that conceives of forests in terms of some originary plenitude—of presence, innocence, community, or even perception” (155). And yet, this nostalgia “is an ambivalent stance: it cannot but evoke the condition it laments, and by the same token it cannot but present its lost paradise (or forests) as anything but imaginary, inaccessible, or unreal” (156).

10. See Boumelha; Edwards 144–47; Spector; and Yeazell, *Art* 125–61.

11. Both media studies and environmental humanities share a grounding in historical materialism, and the term “media ecology” was coined in 1968 to describe the complex communications systems which surround humans yet also include them and are constitutive of them. See Postman and Heise for more on this topic.

12. See Williams’s entry for “Naturalism” in *Keywords*: “Character and action were seen as affected or determined by *environment*” (217).

13. As Hansen puts it, “the aura is not an inherent property of persons or objects but pertains to the *medium* of perception” (342).

14. As a student in London in the 1860s, Hardy “began to frequent the smaller, private galleries which tended to show paintings of a more ambitious or avant-garde nature” (Bullen 23). See Webster or Yeazell, *Art* 53–60 for more on Hardy and Impressionism.

15. Hardy later changed the title to *Under the Greenwood Tree; Or, The Mellstock Quire: A Rural Painting of the Dutch School*.

16. As Armstrong writes, the Victorian novel “defined what was real in terms of what could and would eventually be depicted by a photographic image” (10). And as Freedgood writes, photography “held its prose counterpart to a high standard of empirical accuracy” (“Nineteenth” 329).

17. The waxwork museum had emerged in the nineteenth century as a new form of lurid entertainment. Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* treats it as a species of spectacular fantasy, a “dream house” (409).

18. See Gatrell for a discussion of the significance of the Wordsworthian title (18-19).

19. Freedgood uses Hardy’s *Woodlanders*, which depicts “a fully alienated form of consumption” (153), to exemplify a shift toward what we might call commodity realism.

20. *Woodlanders*, published fifteen years after *Under the Greenwood Tree*, is set in a similar natural environment with trees, apples, cider, and footpaths, and is engaged in the human-arboreal relationship in ways that connect with my analysis here. The novel is not as externalized in perspective as *Under the Greenwood Tree*, however, and it emphasizes psychological interiority and depth to a much greater degree, thus the effects of its arboreal focus are different. See Cohen for an excellent analysis of tree-human exchange in this novel.

21. In the 1840s England made the definitive transition from a rural to an urban population, with more than half of its population living in cities (Malm 145).

22. Also relevant here is the term “Plantationocene,” which has been proposed as a more accurate alternative to “Anthropocene,” given that particular ecological strategies on the part of some humans—not humanity writ large—are responsible for altering Earth’s processes. As Haraway notes, “Plantationocene” describes “the devastating transformation of diverse kinds of human-tended farms, pastures, and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations” (162).

23. Beer influentially argues that “Hardy’s texts pay homage to human scale by ceasing as the hero or heroine dies” (223), but the conclusion of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, unlike the novels she discusses, is not marked by the termination of the human life span. Beer’s brief but evocative discussion of trees in *The Woodlanders* is also relevant here (233-34).

24. This is a revision to the more general notion of realism as a materialist or anti-ideational genre. As Jameson writes, realism has long been associated with demystification and the “painful cancellation of tenaciously held illusions” (4). But realism is also, of course, highly illusory.

25. Hardy’s interest in the trace has been discussed most famously by Scarry. She describes how he “persistently calls attention to the visible record of the exchange between the human creature and the world immediately beyond the boundary of the human body” (91), connecting this to Hardy’s “deep camaraderie with the material realm in which the everyday drama of survival takes place” (105).

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