

Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy's *Woodlanders*

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In a characteristic passage from *The Woodlanders* (1887), Thomas Hardy's narrator describes winter turning to spring:

The leaves over Hintock unrolled their creased tissues, and the woodland seemed to change from an open filigree to a solid opaque body of infinitely larger shape and importance. The boughs cast green shades, which disagreed with the complexion of the girls who walked there. [...] Except at mid-day the sun was not seen complete by the Hintock people, but rather in the form of numerous little stars staring through the leaves.¹

In this word-picture of vegetal profusion, the visual impression of span-gled or dappled light assumes tactile form. The spectator apprehends the texture of the visual material — the leaves that 'unrolled their creased tissues' and a landscape that shifts from being dominated by linear forms to planar ones. As the passage incorporates both sight and touch, so the agency of the seasonal transformation is both human and arboreal. The bodies of trees and people mutually impress and adapt to each other: 'green shades' spread across 'the complexion of the girls' and it is not entirely clear who is disagreeing with whom. Vegetable matter and human countenances are equally elements of the landscape, shaping and perceiving each other's forms.

In its sensory melding of people and environment, Hardy's prose points to a larger question about what constitutes the Victorian tactile imagination. One approach to this question would be through mid-twentieth-century philosophers of phenomenology, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who place the sense of touch at the centre of their discussions

¹ Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 129. Except where otherwise noted, further references are to this edition, which follows the final, revised text of 1912, and are given after quotations in the text.

of human experience. By this account, human beings become subjects, and encounter the world of objects, through a proximate interface between sensory surfaces as they press against each other. Such a model ultimately aims at an ethical intervention by means of a co-presence of being.² This approach has had a good deal of appeal as it has been revived in recent years by cultural theorists. It has held particular sway in accounts of affects and emotions, where touch is the privileged sense, by virtue of its immediacy and its reciprocity. Unlike distant vision and hearing, which were well suited to Foucault's model of disciplinary subjectivity, touch makes an appeal to other, sometimes unexpected theoretical affiliations, such as the desiring machines of Deleuze and Guattari.

Another approach would be to investigate the historical forms of tactile imagination developed by the Victorians themselves, whether in terms of psychology, philosophy, religion, or literature, disciplines and thought-worlds not sharply differentiated in the period. An especially fruitful area for such inquiry has been in art theory and criticism, as Hilary Fraser's work has shown: by investigating emerging tactile theories of visual art, we can witness a reorientation of the senses already well underway in the nineteenth century, from the dominant visual mode, which tends to be characterized in hieratic and sometimes disciplinary terms, to a haptic one that is understood as offering more proximate, affective, and incremental relations between subjects and objects.³

This article attempts to bring together these two approaches, turning to some recent developments in cultural theory as well as to Hardy's novel for its guiding principles. I propose that the tactile modality provides a point of entry into discussions of both affect and ecology, and for understanding the materiality of the human, whether that material is regarded in bodily terms or in terms of its non-differentiation from its environment. At the same time, I consider *The Woodlanders* for the theory of tactile imagination that it promotes — not so much because it provides a vivid description of the natural world as because, in so doing, it demands a reorientation of ideas about what constitutes nature and how we understand the human. Concerns with affect and environment are not just an-

² Alexander R. Galloway, 'The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism', *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (2013), 347–66, writes: 'Phenomenology has a politics, to be sure: beyond the ravages of modern life, the return to a more poetic state of being guided by care and solicitude' (p. 357).

³ Hilary Fraser, 'Foreword', in *Illustrations, Optics and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Literary and Visual Cultures*, ed. by Luisa Calè and Patrizia Di Bello (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. ix–xv.

anticipated or interpreted by Hardy, but are in many ways exceeded by the conception of the human, through the tactile, that he undertakes. My question is less what cultural theory has to teach us about Hardy than the reverse.

I begin by discussing the role of the tactile in affect and environmental studies, before turning to Hardy's simultaneous novelization and theorization of these same concerns. In the past few years, a wave of new approaches in literary and cultural studies has emerged, which has gone variously under the names of affect theory, object or thing studies, new materialisms, and posthumanism. These labels have different meanings in different contexts, and are importantly distinct from one another. But they all share an interest in the material conditions of human embodiment both in the contemporary moment and historically. They also share an essential difference from psychoanalytic, Marxist, and Foucault-influenced approaches, in that they resist (or at least are sceptical about) the foundational primacy of language in any account of power, social relations, and the psyche, which was long presumed by post-structuralist thinking to be unimpeachable. Moreover, they have a distinct intellectual genealogy: drawing less from Derrida and other post-structuralists, and certainly less from psychoanalysis, and looking more to Spinoza, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze and Guattari, and others in non-dualist and phenomenological traditions, which frequently feature tactile modes of perception and are suspicious of the primacy of vision. These are some of the currents informing recent developments in so-called ecocriticism, animal studies, object-oriented ontology, and other areas generally connected to the speculative realist movement in Continental philosophy.

To those who have not spent much time in the loosely defined area of affect studies in particular, it can appear both forbidding and vague. Even to get a clear view on it is a challenge, so to approach that initial question I turn to an article published in 2011 in *Critical Inquiry* by the historian of science Ruth Leys. Leys's argument is a stringent critique and denunciation of affect theory, which has the virtue of delimiting the field and providing some definitional clarity. Leys writes that many contemporary theorists

suggest that the affects must be viewed as independent of, and [...] prior to, ideology — that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs — because they are nonsignifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning. For the theorists in question, affects are 'inhuman,' 'pre-subjective,' 'visceral'

forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these.⁴

While the uninitiated might imagine that affects are amorphous emotions, in fact, in this realm of thought, affects are understood as materially embodied responses or reflexes, which emanate from the body and lie beyond language or cognition. Leys identifies the main features of this turn in cultural as well as scientific theory — that is, an ascription of even the most seemingly evanescent aspects of human behaviour to material sources. Her critique is, in short, that affect theory relies on a form of biological reductivism, which reimposes the dualism it would seem to be designed to evade, and she criticizes it for neutralizing political agency, since autonomic bodily response is prior to intention and reason. While her criticisms have merit, her approach may yet *impose* the dualism it professes to discover. But this theory-world often exhibits a recursive game of ‘dualism-gotcha’, whereby everyone claims to expose the dualism of those they wish to debunk.

The most explicit link between affect and the tactile is in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussion of texture in *Touching Feeling*, which helped to establish the connections between feelings as sensate and as emotion, showing how the material and the immaterial are inextricably intertwined. Sedgwick suggests that embodied dimensions of perception are at least implicitly tactile modes of understanding. Such an affect-oriented tactile modality tends towards lateral, non-hierarchical, and scalar relations that muddy distinctions between subject and object, and between interior and exterior.⁵ To some extent, Sedgwick’s approach overlaps with another strain in affect theory, associated with Brian Massumi among others, which derives from Deleuze, and Deleuze’s account of affect in turn arises from his reading of Spinoza.⁶ This genealogy is pertinent because it converges on Hardy, who was thinking about Spinoza (and specifically about monism) while working on *The Woodlanders*, and whom he quotes several times in the novel. The novel and affect theory might thus be said to have a common point of origin — or to be different branches of the same tree.

⁴ Ruth Leys, ‘The Turn to Affect: A Critique’, *Critical Inquiry*, 37 (2011), 434–72 (p. 437).

⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁶ See William Egginton, ‘Affective Disorder’, *diacritics*, 40.4 (2012), 25–43.

Across a range of affect theories, humans are understood as material things in a world of things, and the world as a collection of vital agencies and networked actors, of which people are but some. This tactile, material, and phenomenological orientation arises not only in affect studies, but increasingly in environmental studies as well, whose recent practitioners strive to denaturalize the human rather than to advocate for the preservation of an exterior realm of nature.⁷ As the most prominent critic in environmental aesthetics, Timothy Morton presents a view of ecology not as setting the human against nature — such that people must either mourn or fix it — but rather of ecology as a complex system in which relations between the human and the non-human world are dialectical and open-ended.⁸ Morton urges a turn away from what he regards as a sentimental view of nature, and he is willing to risk both the anthropomorphization of things and a deprivileging of the human to get there. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* employs a different idiom but to related ends, and it too shows how a tactile, proximate understanding can help explain both the materiality of the human and its continuities with the environment in ecological terms. Bennett draws on Bruno Latour's concept of 'actants' as 'a source of action that can be either human or non-human; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things'.⁹ To disaggregate agency — or what Bennett calls vibrancy — from the human is to understand elements of the world as more interrelated and, she argues, ethically inter-implicated than any approach that presumes the primacy of the human:

If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. [...] Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are

⁷ See Lawrence Buell's genealogy of eco-studies, 'Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends', *Qui Parle*, 19.2 (2011), 87–115.

⁸ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Morton argues for preserving dualism, and for respecting the radical otherness of the environment, because, he suggests, to claim a fundamental oneness with nature is to abdicate responsibility for one's place within it, either conceptually or politically. This does not, however, entail losing sight of the interconnectedness of people and things (pp. 179–80, 184).

⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. viii.

kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. (p. 13)

Such a statement could be viewed as a move away from identitarian political claims. Alternatively, it might be seen to advocate for post-structuralist critiques that aim to dislodge the subject — for a body designated by identity categories is not the primary unit of analysis. Attention shifts to entities like the human and the non-human, matter and essence, the vital and the inert.¹⁰

These positions in cultural theory resonate consistently with Hardy's concerns. *The Woodlanders* is a novel imbued with the sense that the human body and the natural world are of a piece, each shaping the other to its purposes in both material and conceptual terms. Like much of Hardy's prose fiction, its interest lies less in its somewhat lurid and contrived plot details and more in its descriptive language; less in psychologistic portraits of characters than in fantastical modes of evoking the relationship between inner and outer human states, and between such states and the world that surrounds and pervades them. Appreciating these qualities means approaching this book with a different set of priorities than with much other fiction: to read, that is, not for plot or character, but by dwelling on what I confess I once thought of as the 'boring parts': the descriptions of trees and other natural forms, and of the processes by which human characters work on, and are in turn worked on by, these trees.¹¹ Indeed, one way of reading the novel is to regard the trees as people and the people as trees. This is not so much an exercise in anthropomorphization — that is, imbuing inanimate forms with human qualities — as an effort to

¹⁰ To think on a macro scale about weather or the electrical grid or the Pacific trash vortex, or, as the French social theorist Gilbert Simondon has done, about the conceptual models of collective action in flocks of birds or magnetic fields, is to see the potential for what one of Simondon's interpreters calls the 'compossibility and complex becoming', beyond the individual, the subject, or even the human; see Couze Venn, 'Individuation, Relationality, Affect: Rethinking the Human in Relation to the Living', *Body & Society*, 16.1 (2010), 129–61 (p. 129). Processes of becoming and relationality (as in Simondon and Deleuze) and of distributive agency (as in Bennett and Latour) extend notions of agency in reciprocal, unpredictable, impersonal ways.

¹¹ The 'boring' — which is to say, non-narrative — parts of the novels are what critics generally think of as Hardy's 'poetry'. See Kramer's note on the text in *The Woodlanders*: 'The pragmatic and even mechanical flair of much of his plotting is countered by a bent towards poetry' (p. xxxi).

see people as at least in part material and sensate; or, perhaps better, as rooted, budding, leafy, and abloom.¹²

If Hardy in general, and *The Woodlanders* in particular, seems a predictable place to think about humans in relation to nineteenth-century ideas about the environment, this work interests me not because it is so woody and outdoorsy that it represents nature in some full way, but rather because it so systematically breaks down distinctions between human and non-human, and specifically between people and trees. Hardy can be read as enshrining pious notions about the care of the earth (such ideas might be called sappy, except that term becomes more interesting in this arboreal ecology); he has been a favourite among ecologically minded readers, and passages of ‘nature writing’ that lend themselves to such conclusions abound.¹³ But because Hardy is also open to reading as profoundly *de*-naturalizing of the human and the environment, he solicits our interest by upending a lot of conventional ideas about nature. Darwin stands behind these arguments, and Hardy might well have learned to recognize the non-human in the human from evolutionary writing, as Gillian Beer has richly suggested. The influence of evolution has been so widely discussed in this context that I do not address it further here, although Beer’s argument about the *scale* of the human in Hardy is essential for any discussion of the environment.¹⁴ In this sense, Hardy belongs to the Romantic tradition that Morton sees not as enshrining an idea of na-

¹² For recent developments in vegetal philosophy, see Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); and Elaine P. Miller, *The Vegetative Soul: From Philosophy of Nature to Subjectivity in the Feminine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

¹³ J. M. Bullen, *The Expressive Eye: Fiction and Perception in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), presents a version of this dichotomy: ‘Like [other] elegies, *The Woodlanders* resembles an act of mourning for some kind of loss. But it is not for the loss of an individual or even a way of life: it is for the loss of a simple, primitive mode of perception — for a change which has come over the face of nature. This change is located not so much in nature itself, however, as in man’s failure to respond to the transcendent beauty of nature and his incapacity to take an uninhibited, unqualified joy in what had once been a source of pleasure and solace’ (p. 175).

¹⁴ Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 220–41.

ture as ‘out there’ — demanding that we feel bad about its desecration — but rather as provoking readers to recognize that nature is itself a human concept, that we *are* nature, and its concerns are ours. In a related way, in the most significant recent reading of *The Woodlanders*, Tim Dolin argues that ecocriticism has ignored the lessons of Raymond Williams, who showed the ‘natives’ in Hardy to be fully enmeshed in a modern economy, not anachronistically bearing forth a primitive connection to the natural world.¹⁵ Dolin offers a valuable discussion of visual perspectives in the novel, demonstrating how its contradictions work out a space for a certain ‘situatedness’ of characters, narrators, and readers, which partakes of both the insider’s view and the tourist’s extrinsic one. Dolin argues that Hardy’s novels cannot be said to align strictly with any one perspective; instead, they perform the encounter of these perspectives with one another.¹⁶

This is a helpful way of integrating the often contradictory evidence in the novels. My approach to *The Woodlanders* aims to take account not just of visual perspectives, however, but of the more graduated and interpenetrative ones of the tactile — manifest even in the novel’s approach to visual description — that also permit of greater commerce between human and non-human characters. Hardy characteristically places a lot of pressure on embodied aspects of perception. Like several of his works, *The Woodlanders* opens with a view of a rural landscape with which the reader is presumed to be unfamiliar; description of this landscape is routed through the perceptions of a human figure, usually an outsider as well, who arrives on the scene and takes it in. In this case, the stranger, serving as the reader’s surrogate, begins to get oriented as he comes upon a local institution, a carrier’s van carting passengers. ‘This van’, we read, ‘was rather a movable attachment of the roadway than an extraneous object, to those who knew it well’ (p. 6). A couple of paragraphs of description of the van, the horse, and the driver follow, and then this:

In the rear of the van was a glass window, which she [the driver] cleaned with her pocket-handkerchief every market-day before starting. Looking at the van from the back the

¹⁵ Tim Dolin, ‘Who Belongs Where in *The Woodlanders*?’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73 (2012), 545–68.

¹⁶ See also Bullen; John Barrell, ‘Geographies of Hardy’s Wessex’, in *The Regional Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1800–1990*, ed. by K. D. M. Snell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 99–118; John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 122–43.

spectator could thus see, through its interior, a square piece of the same sky and landscape that he saw without, but intruded on by the profiles of the seated passengers; who, as they rumbled onward, their lips moving and heads nodding in animated private converse, remained in cheerful unconsciousness that their mannerisms and facial peculiarities were sharply defined to the public eye. (p. 7)

Having had our view of this scene routed through one particular spectator, we here have it further conditioned, in a tactile mode. Rather than directly receiving the scene through transparent verbal description, the reader sees it being seen, filtered through the medium of the carriage window that frames and makes visible its contents, and that might, by the flick of a hand, become clearer or less visible. The image has a proto-cinematic quality, framed and viewed as though through a lens, and with its sound blocked or out of sync: this is a haptic vision that brings the reader into consciousness of the visual apparatus, both in its mechanical operations and as an interior physiological process. This is but the first of many scenes in the novel that are reflected or refracted through mirrors, windows, spyglasses, and microscopes (perhaps the most memorable being the one in which Grace first sees Fitzpiers in a mirror that reflects his awakening). It correlates with other scenes of perception that, even when not filtered through a semi-transparent medium, depict figures emerging from darkness or murkiness into better lit conditions, where they can enter the reader's conscious perception as if appearing on a stage or a screen, or those who can be heard or felt well before they can be seen.

These forms of tangible sight are not unique to *The Woodlanders*, nor even to Hardy, but they suggest how, as many theorists of visual culture have suggested, an attention to the aesthetics of visual form can itself make operational the idea of vision as a mediated and material practice, rather than a direct and transparent one. In this particular vision framed through the van window, we see the human figures interleaved with the landscape, which is both continuous with and broken from the unframed exterior — a visual device that might serve as an emblem for the novel as a whole.

The outsider who, in this case, arrives on the opening scene is the relatively cosmopolitan Barber Percombe, who is on a quest for an especially resplendent head of hair that he wishes to harvest for a wig. The view through the van window of 'the spectator' both does and does not belong to him: it does, in the sense that he is the embodied stranger who must interpret these opening scenes; and yet it does not, in the sense that

he has already mounted the van before we are given the view of it from the rear. But once we realize that we are, at least in part, seeing through his eyes, we can make sense of the simile at the end of the novel's opening paragraph in the original edition, which states that, 'At one place, where a hill is crossed, the largest of the woods shows itself bisected by the highway, as the head of thick hair is bisected by the white line of its parting.'¹⁷ Hardy in this novel is working out the idea that every view is particular, that perceptions are subjective rather than objective. At some points, he ventures into heady philosophical terrain — associated, as I mentioned, with Spinoza — speculating about the extent to which the real is anything other than the impression it makes on a particular embodied consciousness.¹⁸ Specifically in connection with this covetous wigmaker, the narrator alludes to the subjective practices of Impressionist painting (with which Hardy was becoming familiar during the novel's composition). For when he comes upon what he seeks — a view of Marty South from a doorway, unnoticed by her — what we see is him seeing what he wants to see:

In her present beholder's mind the scene formed by the girlish spar-maker composed itself into an impression-picture of extremest type, wherein the girl's hair alone, as the focus of observation, was depicted with intensity and distinctness, while her face, shoulders, hands, and figure in general were a blurred mass of unimportant detail lost in haze and obscurity. (pp. 10–11)

This is an optical effect of the barber's mind — and of the narrator's painterly frame of reference — on the scene.

While the barber focuses myopically on the vision of her hair, Marty is a figure who might better be understood in terms of her arboreal than her human qualities. When she first comes into view, she is situated

¹⁷ Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. by Dale Kramer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 5, n. 5.

¹⁸ See *The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1985); Hardy quotes Spinoza from Lewes's *The Story of Goethe's Life* (1, 14). Björk notes that 'Hardy's own reaction to Spinoza is complex, and what he read by him uncertain'. He then quotes Fitzpiers's citations of Spinoza in *The Woodlanders* and states: 'As Hardy's overall ironic attitude towards Fitzpiers's transcendentalism [...] does not seem to be at work to any significant extent in either passage, Hardy here simply allows a generally not very attractive character to be an authorial spokesman' (1, 260–61).

in a home deep in the woods, working late into the night before a ‘fire, which was ample, and of wood’ — for of such fuel there is no shortage — and engaged in ‘making spars — such as are used by thatchers — with great rapidity’ (p. 9). She fashions the raw wood into useful forms in this literal cottage industry, and practically everything around her derives from trees. The narrative focuses minutely on her manual labour, describing not only the action of her hands but also their appearance and significance. She

examined the palm of her right hand, which unlike the other was ungloved, and showed little hardness or roughness about it. The palm was red and blistering, as if her present occupation were as yet too recent to have subdued it to what it worked in. (p. 10)

With its allusion to the Shakespeare sonnet that is the *locus classicus* for blurring the distinction between labour and materials, this sentence of tactile imagery shows how the trees fashion Marty as much as she remakes them. The first woodlander we encounter in the novel, she is in and of and by the trees. The narrator proceeds to describe her features, and these too seem moulded as much by hand as by eye:

Her face had the usual fulness of expression which is developed by a life of solitude. Where the eyes of a multitude continuously beat like waves upon a countenance they seem to wear away its mobile power; but in the still water of privacy every feeling and sentiment unfolds in visible luxuriance, to be interpreted as readily as a printed word by an intruder. (p. 10)

This typically Hardyian idea, of a face worn away by being looked at, offers a tactile concept of sight, one that is echoed in the many passages of the novel where trees rub and wear each other away, in a directly competitive struggle for resources.

Finally, like a tree valued for the resplendent produce of its blossom, Marty shows off her copious harvest:

She had but little pretension to beauty; save in one prominent particular, her hair.

Its abundance made it almost unmanageable; its colour was, roughly speaking, and as seen here by fire-light, brown; but careful notice, or an observation by day, would have re-

vealed that its true shade was a rare and beautiful approximation to chestnut. (p. 10)

That final word helps to confirm a reading of Marty as a tree. Doing so offers a way of designating a subject without limiting subjectivity as a condition of the human, nor of requiring that the subject be wholly differentiated from its surroundings. That, after shearing herself and selling her locks, Marty refers to ‘her stubbly poll’ of a head (p. 37) — as one would speak of a tree that is pollard — helps to reinforce the image of the barren chestnut, just as the opening vision of the arboreal landscape as a head whose hair has been parted by the highway reverses this metaphor. To read Marty as a tree is not to regard her as any less human, nor is it to diminish the clarity with which the novel shows how her gender and her class both impede her access to fulfilment. It suggests that treeness is a quality both like and unlike other identity categories, one that connects her to forms of existence with a wider compass than the human, whether regarded in terms of the life cycle of the individual or the species. The question of how individual identity correlates to the species arises again in the last scene in the book, where Marty is shown tending to Giles’s grave:

As this solitary and silent girl stood there in the moonlight, a straight slim figure, clothed in a plaitless gown, the contours of womanhood so undeveloped as to be scarcely perceptible in her, the marks of poverty and toil effaced by the misty hour, she touched sublimity at points, and *looked almost like a being who had rejected with indifference the attribute of sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism.* (p. 331, emphasis added)

The signs of Marty’s gender and class that the narrative verbally emphasizes are, at the same time, optically distorted by the moonlight, allowing her to appear to embody ‘abstract humanism’. During the period in which he was composing *The Woodlanders*, Hardy used the term ‘abstract’ in his literary notebooks in a Neoplatonic sense to mean that which is more real than the visible surface of things.¹⁹ Here he seems to beg the

¹⁹ From *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Michael Millgate (London: Macmillan, 1984): ‘The human race to be shown as one great network or tissue, which quivers in every part when one point is shaken, like a spider’s web if touched. Abstract realisms to be in the form of Spirits, Spectral figures, &c. The Realities to be the true realities of life, hitherto called abstractions. The old material realities to be placed behind the former, as shadowy accessories’ (4 March

question, ‘What does an abstract human look like?’. The answer the novel proposes is: a tree. The arboreal is both the visible essence and the transcendent materiality of the human, as exemplified by Marty.

If in her labour, her being, and her becoming alike, Marty manifests an ‘abstract humanism’ that is more like a tree than a person, she returns us to the question of what it might do to our protocols of novel-reading if, instead of beginning with plot or character, we read for setting. From the perspective of the trees, then, who or what is Marty? She is their protector and destroyer, their propagator and their product too. When she plants trees, she notes that she feels them breathe or sigh on her (p. 59). She climbs in among the smallest branches for the barking, stripping the trees of their outer layers, as in the opening chapters when she fashions spars out of their branches. From a human point of view, such productive labour depends on the tree as the source of what the narrator calls the ‘raw material of her manufacture’ (p. 9). But from the tree’s perspective, it becomes an essential element of human life, which extends its agency. The tree’s transformation — from the vertical orientation of its living state to the horizontal one it assumes when it becomes wood — does not promote its life in an evolutionary sense, one that will be familiar to readers of Michael Pollan’s books about agriculture from the plants’ point of view.²⁰ Yet in this transformation and extension of its being, the

1886, p. 183); ‘After looking at the landscape by Bonington in our drawing room [...] I feel that Nature is played out as a Beauty, but not as a Mystery. I don’t want to see landscapes, i.e., scenic paintings of them, because I don’t want to see the original realities — as optical effects, that is. I want to see the deeper reality underlying the scenic, the expression of what are sometimes called abstract imaginings’ (January 1887, p. 192). Sometimes this abstraction has a spiritual dimension; sometimes it is a form of materialism that is truer or deeper than the visible. He writes that ‘The material is not the real — only the visible, the real being invisible optically. That it is because we are in a somnabulistic [*sic*] hallucination that we think the real to be what we see as real’ (Bullen, p. 170, n. 2). Bullen argues that ‘throughout the novel [*The Woodlanders*] there is the sense that the visible, the external, and the corporeal are merely the carapace for some underlying reality, and that the phenomenal is merely the visible essence of the noumenal’ (p. 173). This quality of what Hardy calls the real helps to explain how, in having her particular human characteristics effaced, Marty attains a degree of abstraction, a condition that transcends the earthly and yet is still essentially material.

²⁰ See, for example, Michael Pollan, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (New York: Random House, 2000). Compared to Hardy’s other novels, this one evinces a relative absence of animal life forms, apart from occasional birds and rabbits in the forest, and the domesticated horses that various characters ride. One might hazard that trees here assume the usual function of animals, as a sen-

tree adapts the human actor to preserve, reshape, and in some ways become it.

Reading from the perspective of individual trees can reorganize our sense of the novel, putting the emphasis on the tactile. Early in the story, for example, when Grace Melbury makes her first appearance, she takes Giles Winterborne by surprise as he stands in the marketplace, selling apple trees and cider:

While she [Marty] regarded him he lifted his eyes in a direction away from Marty, and his face kindled with recognition and surprise. She followed his gaze and saw walking across to him a flexible young creature in whom she perceived the features of her she had known as Miss Grace Melbury. [...] Winterborne, being fixed to the spot by his appletree, could not advance to meet her. (p. 34)

He is rooted in place by the ten-foot-tall specimen tree he is supporting, unable to move and greet Grace properly. Giles and the apple tree are identified with each other, and for them fixedness is an ordinary state of being. The prose here is shot through with arboreality, as we read about a ‘*branch* of his business’, how ‘his face *kindled* with recognition’, of his ‘being *fixed* to the spot by his appletree’, her being ‘a *flexible* young creature’, and finally, how ‘she held out to him a hand graduating from pink at the tips of the fingers to white at the palm’, sounding like nothing so much as an apple blossom (p. 34). This scene establishes some of the conflict between the mobile, flexible Grace and the relatively fixed and unchanging Giles. But from the point of view of the tree that stands at its centre and that overlooks the action, the strange thing is the movement of people beneath and around it. The tree exhibits a form of tactile perception: it knows but that with which it comes into proximate contact, and that mode of knowledge is shared with the most tree-like people in the book. And indeed, this scene is presented not only from the perspective of the singular apple tree, but also from that of another tree who looks on — namely Marty.

The agency of trees in human affairs is exaggerated, in both pathetic and comic form, by Marty’s father, who understands his life to be ineluctably correlated to that of the elm tree that stands before their cottage. This tree has particular sway in the plot because John South’s life is also

tient alternative to human life. See Ivan Kreilkamp, ‘Pitying the Sheep in *Far from the Madding Crowd*’, *Novel*, 42 (2009), 474–81.

the measure of the lifehold leases that he and Giles have on their homes. He is infirm and querulous, obsessively attached to and tormented by this tree. ‘I could bear up, I know I could,’ he states, ‘if it were not for the tree — yes, the tree ’tis that’s killing me’ (p. 83). Marty remarks,

‘The shape of it seems to haunt him like an evil spirit. He says that it is exactly his own age, *that it has got human sense*, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave. Others have been like it afore in Hintock.’ (p. 93, emphasis added)

Here is a relation both mystical and mechanical. South and the tree are each other’s ghosts and familiars, bound together in a common life cycle, and the effort to console him by eradicating the tree does the reverse: it kills him through the insuperable identification between them. If Marty attains to tree-like qualities that transcend her humanity, her father’s life is so tied to one particular tree that he can endure neither this tree-bound life nor its separation. There are, in fact, so many forms of dependency, likeness, and mutual adaptation among people and trees in the book that the tactile qualities come to seem dominant: there is a rubbing together or textural overlap between them.

The reciprocal relationship between human and non-human agency extends across Hardy’s prose. In one sense, as I have suggested, the people in *The Woodlanders* are, to a greater or lesser extent, arboreal: they fall along a spectrum, and each exhibits different aspects of treeness. But in another sense, all of the trees are themselves cultivated: they are the product of human labour and intention. This interlocking relationship of mutual constitution by trees and people is at the heart of Hardy’s conception, and it is a formulation, as I have been arguing, made available through a reading of the tactile. Let me take these points now in turn. The arboreal qualities of the people are deep and variegated. Marty, for example, inherits her father’s attachment to the woodlands, and since we never learn about her mother, it seems as if she — like any fruit-bearing tree in an apple orchard — is the product of a graft, rather than a hybrid. She shares with Giles many of her tree affinities, and together they practically form a single vegetal entity, like two trunks that an observer would be hard pressed to identify as one tree or two:

Marty South alone, of all the women in Hintock and the world, had approximated to Winterborne’s level of intelligent intercourse with Nature. In that respect she had formed his

true complement in the other sex, had lived as his counterpart, had subjoined her thoughts to his as a corollary.

The casual glimpses which the ordinary population bestowed upon that wondrous world of sap and leaves called the Hintock woods had been with these two, Giles and Marty, a clear gaze. [...] From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces when brushing through them in the dark either could pronounce upon the species of the tree whence they stretched; from the quality of the wind's murmur through a bough either could in like manner name its sort afar off. (pp. 297–98)

Like Marty, Giles is fully in and of the woods, possessing an instinctive — one might say affective — knowledge of trees that runs so deep that it goes beyond cognition, to the realm of species identification: ‘there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on’ (p. 58). Such passages invite a reading of simple woodland primitives who are ‘close to nature’ and differentiated from the sophisticated non-native urbanites who have lost their links to the natural world. But in attaining to treeness, Giles and Marty do not so much belong to a different species than others — which would set them apart as figures of exotic anachronism — as lie on one side of a spectrum. When Fitzpiers, for example, one of the urbane characters most deliberately contrasted with the native woodland folk, engages in philosophical speculation about the subjectivity of perception — even to the extent of quoting Spinoza — he adverts immediately to an example of trees (‘oak, ash, or elm’, as he says) being only distinctive according to the observer.²¹ For all Fitz-

²¹ Fitzpiers says, “Human love is a subjective thing — the essence itself of man, as that great thinker Spinoza says — *ipsa hominis essentia*; it is joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision, just as the rainbow iris is projected against an oak, ash, or elm tree indifferently” (p. 106); and, “That the Idea had for once completely fulfilled itself in the objective substance — which he had hitherto deemed an impossibility — he was enchanted enough to fancy must be the case at last’ (p. 130). See also Hardy’s poem of 1920, ‘Our Old Friend Dualism’, in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. by James Gibson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 892:

All hail to him, the Protean! A tough old chap is he:
 Spinoza and the Monists cannot make him cease to be.
 We pound him with our ‘Truth, Sir, please!’ and quite appear to still
 him:
 He laughs; holds Bergson up, and James; and swears we cannot kill
 him.

piers's absurdity, the trees seem to rub off on his ideas as much as everything else in *The Woodlanders*.

If everyone is in some proximity to arboreality, the effect is to highlight their non-human qualities. Yet for all their mystical connection to the arboreal, even the most tree-like characters are engaged in the very human activity of planting and cultivating agricultural products, not simply moving about in spontaneously occurring rural scenes. While the novel does contain some striking pictures of organic existence that seem to stand wholly apart from human cultivation — such as the richly depicted fungi that the narrator describes growing in the forest (e.g., pp. 48, 280) — it is impossible to distinguish the arenas in which human intervention has made a difference from some fantasy of a place wholly devoid of the human touch. There is no landscape in the British Isles unaltered by human presence, so one begins to see Morton's point that nature, as such, does not exist, and that we might do better to abjure the term altogether, since it can only invoke a distinction from culture that is dubious from the outset. What Giles and Marty illustrate is not a foundational connection to the natural world that is hopelessly remote from the rest of us, but instead a generalized breakdown of the differentiation between the natural and the cultural, the environment and the human. Their treeness paradoxically reveals what Hardy calls the abstract or the real, in the philosophical explorations of his notebooks — that higher level of existence of which we get a glimpse when we focus our perceptual apparatus intently on the material presence of this world. In a neat closing of the circle, this is precisely the topic of Fitzpiers's investigations of natural and abstract philosophy: the suggestion that an understanding of reality originates in subjective experience rather than an objectively observable exterior.

I have been arguing that Hardy eradicates the distinction between people and trees by emphasizing their common material properties. At the same time, he defeats any notion of the purely natural by showing how human intervention always plays a role in both the experience and the idea of nature. We can see this reciprocal formulation between the non-human and the unnatural borne out once more in the two distinct types of wooded landscapes that the novel portrays. This distinction is signalled even in its opening sentences, which refer to 'extensive woodlands, interspersed with apple-orchards [...] [and] the trees, timber or

We argue them pragmatic cheats. 'Aye,' says he. 'They're deceiving:
But I must live; for flamens plead I am all that's worth believing!'

fruit-bearing as the case may be' (p. 5). While the labour in which we see Marty engaged primarily concerns the cultivation and harvesting of timber products, Giles is shown in both this realm and the other, of fruit trees, at different points. These two agricultural activities have different rhythms, procedures, and locations. In the timber industry, the trees are themselves the products, cultivated and harvested for their bark and their wood, and we see all the agricultural produce (from spar-gads to firewood to floor planks) generated, manufactured, and then replaced by the planting of new trees. This is a cycle of destruction and recreation, of death and rebirth. In the fruit market, however, the trees are the source of produce — the machinery, rather than the product itself — and the emphasis would seem to be on sexual labour and reproduction. Neither economy is closer to the human, either pragmatically or conceptually. While the novel's plotting tells us that Marty is disappointed in her love for Giles, the link between them, as we have seen, is not so much sexual as arboreal: they share a common bond to the trees and, through that, to each other, to the extent that they are not wholly separate from the woodland landscape. Giles and Grace are embarked on a much more conventional romance, however, and the imagery surrounding them is correspondingly that of the apple trees. Grace is herself aware of this botanical duality in Giles:

He rose upon her memory as the fruit-god and the wood-god in alternation; sometimes leafy, and smeared with green lichen, as she had seen him amongst the sappy boughs of the plantations; sometimes cider-stained and starred with apple-pips, as she had met him on his return from cidermaking in Blackmoor Vale, with his vats and presses beside him.
(p. 249)

Neither mode is 'natural', both are cultivated; but both also have an agency in excess of human intention. Even the apple trees do not reproduce naturally: they have to be grafted to yield fruit properly. The apparent dichotomy between a cycle of life and death, on one hand, and a cycle of sexual reproduction, on the other, is more artificial than natural, as much a product, in both cases, of human intervention as of the trees' species-instinct for self-perpetuation.

In concluding, I want to acknowledge that Hardy does sometimes tempt us to read his work as enshrining a stark division between primitive, unspoiled nature and the corruptions of modern life. At one point, for instance, Grace imagines Giles as having 'arisen out of the earth', as

‘Autumn’s very brother’, who induces in her a ‘sudden lapse back to Nature unadorned’, and an impulse to ‘revolt for the nonce against social law, [in] her passionate desire for primitive life’ (pp. 185–86). But as we have seen, it would be misleading to take so bald a dichotomy between the natural world and civilization at face value. Hardy undermines this opposition in several ways, and by way of summing up, I want to suggest how these methods present a type of agenda for the tactile imagination. First, Hardy induces forms of discomfort in his readers by focusing perhaps *too* closely on textures and surfaces, a heightened, sometimes nearly operatic scrutiny that makes the natural world seem far from simply given and organic. This denaturalizing effect can arise from, say, staring too intently at the bark of a tree: it starts to seem anything but natural and comforting. In this sense, the tactile defamiliarizes and makes strange the givenness of the phenomenal world. Second, the constant shifts in perspective situate any particular position within a frame of potential critique: Grace may regard Giles as man in his primitive state, but it is not long before the view changes and the taken-for-grantedness of his bond to nature looks very different. The situatedness and the particularity of the tactile thus disarm any claim to transcendence that might be associated with visual mastery. Third, Hardy’s prose style itself frames and contextualizes such views: the notorious shifts in tone, diction, and scale generate such forms of incoherence and self-contradiction that for nearly every assertion or concept there is counter-evidence elsewhere. Hardy’s engagement with a range of philosophical and scientific thought enriches the levels of allusion and suggestion, yet these theories often work at cross-purposes. Like the shifts in perspective among characters, such variations in tone have a destabilizing effect on the reader, suggesting how the tactile imagination is uneven, interruptive, and not very enamoured of consistency or even of coherence. The tactile, that is to say, is anything but smooth. Fourth, and finally, all of these forms of reading and thinking in which Hardy trains us — these modes of the tactile imagination — put things and ideas into proximate relation so they can touch and overlap. Things and ideas are not opposed, in the classical form of a visually oriented subject–object dichotomy, but neither do they wholly melt into each other. Anticipating, perhaps even exceeding, contemporary theorists of affect and environment, Hardy emphasizes the material properties of people and the continuities between them and the worlds they inhabit. In showing how ideas and things rub against each other, he exemplifies tactile ways of knowing.