

## A Return to the Origins of Ecology through Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*

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### Abstract

*Ecology, in its modern understanding, often invokes exclusively the protection of the non-human environment by humans, without any particular focus on a potential relationship between them. This article invites the reader to go back to the original principles of the ecological thought through a close reading of *The Return of the Native*, written by Victorian novelist Thomas Hardy. Rediscovering Hardy's writing in the light of new philosophical and eco-critical works will allow both an assessment of the author's ecological thinking and of the role of the Victorian period in shaping the features of our contemporary ecological movement. Classical works in phenomenology along with more recent and ground-breaking studies in ecopsychology will offer a new perspective on Hardy's novel while relocating the interrelationship between humans and non-humans to the forefront of the ecological stage. The involvement of humans within nature and their subsequent concern for its fate will pervade the argument of this article, which, eventually, aims at initiating a debate on an ecological paradox.*

Opening Thomas Hardy's novel, *The Return of the Native* (1878), feels like opening the Earth's geological journal, starting from the Holocene, 'a Face on which Time makes but a little Impression'<sup>1</sup> and going into the Anthropocene,<sup>2</sup> which hadn't been defined as yet but which Hardy's chapter title seems to be defining with a somewhat uncanny accuracy: 'Humanity appears upon the scene, hand in hand with Trouble' (p. 13). When Hardy published his novel in 1878, trouble was indeed already there, as the Industrial Revolution had altered the relationship between humans and nature and had led to the exploitation of nature

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, 1878, *The Return of the Native* (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), p. 9. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>2</sup> The Holocene is defined as 'the most recent geological epoch, which began approximately 10,000 years ago and still continues and which together with the Pleistocene epoch makes up the Quaternary period' while the Anthropocene refers to 'the epoch of geological time during which human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth, a formal chrono-stratigraphic unit with a base which has been tentatively defined as the mid-twentieth century' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

by human-designed machinery. This shift in perspective is illustrated by the twofold definition of the term ‘ecology’, which was actually coined by Ernst Haeckel in his *Generelle Morphologie der Organismen*<sup>3</sup> only nine years before the publication of *The Return of the Native*.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Oxford English Dictionary offers both an early and a later definition of the term, each representing a different conception of humans’ affiliation to their natural surroundings. Originally, ‘ecology’ referred to ‘the branch of biology that deals with the relationships between living organisms and their environment; the interrelationships between any system and its environment’ and then it gradually took up the modern meaning by which we usually understand it today, that is ‘the study of or concern for the effect of human activity on the environment’.<sup>5</sup> The absence of the word ‘relationship’ from the second definition is all the more striking as it is replaced by the word ‘effect’, thus implying that the human-nature collaboration later became a one-way relationship for the benefits of humans. Now one may wonder whether these two acceptations of the term are irreconcilable and whether or not Hardy’s own understanding of ecology was in accordance with Haeckel’s original definition of it as ‘the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the “conditions of existence”’ (Miller, ‘Ecology’, p. 653). At any rate, I will argue that if ‘the ecological self is a dialogical self’,<sup>6</sup> then, strictly speaking, an ecological text is first and foremost a text that focuses on the interrelationship between characters and their environment, rather than openly and explicitly criticising human actions on that environment.

Famous for his pastoral scenes set up in a ‘partly real, partly dream-country’,<sup>7</sup> Hardy has often been described by critics as a lover of nature as well as a lover of all non-human creatures. His intellectual affinity with Darwin has also been extensively studied, especially in terms of ‘their mutually loving,

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, ‘Ecology’, *Victorian Literature and Culture [Special Issue]*, 46.3/4 (2018), 653-56 (p. 653). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>4</sup> See John Parham, ‘Sustenance from the Past: Precedents to Sustainability in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture’, in *Literature and Sustainability: Concept, Text and Culture*, ed. by John Parham et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 33-51 (p. 36). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>5</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas A. Vakoch and Fernando Castrillon, *Ecopsychology, Phenomenology, and the Environment – the Experience of Nature* (New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media, 2014), p. 152. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Preface, ed. By Robert C. Schweik (New York, NY: Norton, 1986), p. 5.

meticulous and ethically intense attention to the range of nature, organic and inorganic [...]'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, a recovery of Hardy's close relationship to the natural world is not new, and this paper will not try to open doors that have already been opened by many previous works. However, an endeavour to define Hardy's ecological thought cannot be reduced to a study of his affection for nature, the same way as the Darwinian influence or the representation of rural England in his novels cannot be enough to qualify his writing as ecological. On the contrary, some critics such as John MacNeill Miller have interpreted such a strong presence of nature in his novels as 'a misattribution of character status to a landscape', which, instead of encouraging ecological commitment, would paint the picture of a 'single monolithic nature', stable enough to guard against any human threat.<sup>9</sup> The aim of this essay will precisely be to offer new textual analyses in an attempt to reveal the very 'metonymic connection' (p. 160) between humans and their environment that MacNeill Miller deems absent from Hardy's novels.

To that end, I will take up an eco-critical approach whose aim is to explore the link between literature and environmental studies, as critics such as Parham initiated in his exploration of sustainability in nineteenth-century literature,<sup>10</sup> or as Buell applied to American literature in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (1995). Buell's four-fold definition of an environmental text will accompany my investigations on Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, chosen for the particular place it gives to nature and the non-human in general. Moreover, recent theories in green studies may shed a new light on Victorian texts and reveal the pioneering role some of them may have taken up. Drawing upon environmental philosophies theorised by Morton in *The Ecological Thought* (2010) or by Albrecht in *Earth Emotions* (2019), I will try and define whether Hardy's characters think and feel in an ecological way, and more specifically, relying on critics in ecopsychology (Adams, Abram, or Vakoch and Castrillon), whether Hardy had a spiritual connection to nature as such. Now, defining the act of thinking or feeling in relation to nature only applies to the first meaning of the term 'ecology' and does not necessarily lead to ecological actions — that is, actions to protect the environment — being taken. The bridge connecting the psychological

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<sup>8</sup> George Levine, 'Hardy and Darwin: An Enchanting Hardy?', in *A Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Keith Wilson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 36-53 (p. 37).

<sup>9</sup> John MacNeill Miller, 'Mischaracterizing the Environment: Hardy, Darwin, and the Art of Ecological Storytelling', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 62.2 (2020), 149-177 (pp. 150-1). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>10</sup> See Parham.

relationship to nature and the actual need to act on that feeling seems to be provided by Merleau-Ponty, a French philosopher who inspired much writing in ecopsychology and whose phenomenology of perception recently came to be understood and used in an ecological perspective. First theorised by Husserl in the early-twentieth century and further developed by Merleau-Ponty in the mid-twentieth century, the phenomenological approach has indeed been explored in ecological studies for its focus on the interdependence and intermingling of the human and the non-human, echoing both the first definition of ecology as ‘interrelationship’ and the second definition as a ‘concern’ for an environment in which we are all absorbed. Studying Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* thus offers an opportunity to go back to the Victorian origins of the ecological thought and to rediscover them in the light of more recent philosophical and ecological thinking, entertaining the possibility that Hardy may have been a precursor to such thinking.

### **Finding one’s Alter-eco: The Mirroring Effect at the Roots of the Ecological Thought**

In the partly autobiographical *Life of Thomas Hardy*, the author declares: ‘In spite of myself I cannot help noticing countenances and tempers in objects of scenery, e.g. trees, hills, houses’.<sup>11</sup> As suggested in the first definition of the term ecology, perceiving the world in an ecological way starts with feeling affiliated to it in a close relationship. And indeed, when is one more connected to nature than when one actually manages to perceive oneself in nature? Hardy’s ecological thinking seems therefore to be rooted in an anthropomorphic vision of the world that is very much significant in his work: ‘for Hardy, characterisation is completed personification’ (Nishimura, p. 911). His novel *The Return of the Native* starts precisely with a personification of the environmental setting, the heath, as ‘a face’, which appears both in the chapter title and in the core text:

the face of the earth by its mere complexion added half-an-hour to eve;  
it could in like manner retard the dawn, sadden noon, anticipate the  
frowning of storms scarcely generated, and intensify the opacity of a  
moonless midnight to a cause of shaking and dread. (p. 9)

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<sup>11</sup> Satoshi Nishimura, ‘Thomas Hardy and the Language of the Inanimate’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 43.4 (2003), 897-912 (p. 901). Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Here, the personification of the setting is further emphasised by the accumulation of action verbs such as ‘added’, ‘retard’, or ‘intensify’, which tend to give nature some agency, rendered possible by its human-like appearance. Hardy’s extensive use of anthropomorphism in his descriptions is actually qualified by Beer as ‘ambiguous’<sup>12</sup> to the extent that it both empowers nature and deprives it of the possibility of independent action outside of the human scope. On the other hand, the representation of a ‘place perfectly accordant with man’s nature’ seems to be in keeping with the rooting principle of ecology that requires a dialogical harmony between the human and the non-human (Hardy, *Return of the Native*, p. 11) . Even more importantly, Parham defines sustainability as being ‘founded upon a philosophical paradigm that [...] emphasized the energy, complexity, and autonomy [...] of nature’ (p. 34). Seen in such a light, Hardy’s often commented-upon ‘displaying [of] excessive humanity’ (Nishimura, p. 897) would therefore become secondary to his constant effort made to animate nature so as to allow a meaningful conversation between the human and the non-human worlds. In order to nurture an environmental consciousness, in its modern understanding, the first step could be to give a consciousness to the environment, to give it a ‘watchful intentness’ and the ability ‘to tell its true tale’ (Hardy, *Return of the Native*, pp. 9-10).

However, Hardy’s ambivalent anthropomorphism may lead to different interpretations of his intentions, prompting MacNeill Miller to argue that ‘his personification tacitly admits the stability and internal coherence of the landscape as a conceptual category’, resulting in ‘a totalizing understanding of the land and its nonhuman inhabitants as an “environment”’ (p. 161). While I acknowledge the grounds on which such a reasoning is founded, I read Hardy’s personification of the heath as going against the representation of nature as still life, and therefore, as conceptual: ‘when other things sank brooding to sleep, the heath appeared slowly to awake and listen’ (p. 10). Quite significantly, this refusal to depict a motionless nature constitutes, to Buell, one of the four elements that qualify an environmental text: ‘some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text’.<sup>13</sup> In this active environment,

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<sup>12</sup> Gillian Beer, 1983, *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narratives in George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Third Edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 235.

<sup>13</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 8. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Hardy naturally includes non-human creatures that seem to be embedded in the heath, animals thus helping to further animate nature: ‘though these shaggy hills were apparently solitary, several keen round eyes were always ready on such a wintry morning as to converge upon a passers-by’ (p. 88). Here, the synecdochic presence of animals in the landscape goes against MacNeill Miller’s reading of an enviroing heath that would ‘rob individual lives of significance’ (p. 166) and helps to bring humans and animals closer by drawing our attention to the observing tool (the eyes) and the observation ability we share with them. In an effort to see in nature a reflection of humanity, and as a consequence to attribute a deeper meaning to the human-non-human relationship, Hardy chooses to anthropomorphise his animal characters and, more specifically, focuses on their human-like ability to think and feel. In Hardy’s Wessex, birds are compared to philosophers (p. 88), heath-croppers are described ‘wondering what mankind and candlelight could have to do in these haunts at this untoward hour’ (p. 230) and horses can be ‘conscious of misfortune’ (p. 362). If anthropomorphism is often equated with anthropocentrism for its paradoxical focus on the human within the non-human, I would argue that Hardy’s anthropomorphism only reveals a genuine desire to open the human onto the non-human world despite the blatant inability on the part of humans to understand that world outside of their own value system. Because ‘the live adder regarded the assembled group with a sinister look in its small black eye’, a deep and meaningful connection is made possible between the snake and the dying Mrs Yeobright: ‘Mrs Yeobright saw the creature and the creature saw her’ (p. 288). Here, the chiasmus perfectly illustrates the reciprocal respect between the two characters and places them on an equal footing.<sup>14</sup> For any human-environment relationship to be initiated, a mirroring effect seems to be required but the ability to see oneself in the other, performed by anthropomorphism, also needs to apply to the environment.

If Hardy’s fictitious environment often takes up human traits, the reflection of that environment in the descriptions of human characters is just as significant in *The Return of the Native*. As a matching device to anthropomorphism, Hardy’s text is pervaded by what I will call ‘ecomorphism’, that is, quite simply, a reversed anthropomorphism that William A. Cohen also identified in Hardy’s 1887 *The Woodlanders*.<sup>15</sup> In his novel, human characters are seen to be wanting

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<sup>14</sup> To read more on the subject of animals in Hardy’s novels, see Anna West, *Thomas Hardy and Animals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> William A. Cohen, ‘Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy’s *Woodlanders*’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014), p. 6.

to establish contact with their environment by trying to look like it as much as possible: ‘we seem to want the oldest and simplest clothing where the clothing of the earth is so primitive’ (p. 12). Looking natural takes up a new meaning in Hardy’s work as it is directly linked to a genuine desire to get closer to nature, not only by looking *at* it but by looking *like* it. In his study of the relationship between people and the places they inhabit, Casey explains that it is actually common for humans to ‘come to share features with the local landscape’,<sup>16</sup> especially when that landscape is rural rather than urban. A shift in perspective consequently happens when we go from anthropomorphism to ‘ecomorphism’ as the tenor of the simile is not the environment anymore but the human character, compared in his turn to his natural environment: ‘his eye, which glared so strangely through his stain, was in itself attractive — keen as a bird of prey, and blue as autumn mist’ (p. 13). Depending on the weather they are experiencing or on the particular spot they are occupying in a specific moment, the characters’ appearances may change, which says a lot about the interaction between the human and the non-human world: ‘there was a slight hoar-frost that night, and the moon, though not more than half-full, threw a spirited and enticing brightness upon the fantastic figure of the mumming band, whose plumes and ribbons rustles in their walk like autumnal leaves’ (p. 130). Here, the description of the mummers is dictated by the environmental phenomena happening around them, thus giving them a more-than-human dimension in the process. All the more striking is the presence of nature in the portrayal of Eustacia, a character paradoxically estranged from her natural surroundings which she openly hates. In one instance, the young woman is described in such hyperbolic terms that she almost becomes an unexpected representation of the goddess Gaia<sup>17</sup> whose appearance contains the Earth’s day and night cycle: ‘to see her hair was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow. It closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow’ (p. 68). As much as Eustacia would want to keep her environment at a distance, as an inhabitant of the heath, her character, from her physical appearance to her mental features, cannot be fathomed outside of the natural scope of Egdon. Using a floral extended metaphor

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<sup>16</sup> E. S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 305.

<sup>17</sup> Gaia is the goddess of the Earth (Terra Mater). Such an attribution of a goddess status to the character of Eustacia could be further justified by the numerous descriptions of her lonely walks on the heath that are only opportunities for the narrator to describe both her extraordinary beauty and her more-than-human appearance as she merges with her surroundings. For another instance of these descriptions, see Hardy, p. 342.

a few lines later, Hardy further stresses this inextricable link between humans and their non-human counterparts : ‘her presence brought memories of Bourbon roses [...]; her moods recalled lotus-eaters [...]; her motions, the ebb and flow of the sea; her voice, the viola [...]’ (p. 69). Looking in the natural mirror, each of Hardy’s characters seems to be able to find his or her alter-*eco*, which ultimately has the effect of putting the environment itself in the foreground.

As Plotz reminds us, Hardy himself ‘labelled his principal works “Novels of Characters and Environment”’, the use of the conjunction ‘and’ placing the environment as ‘complementary to (rather than determinative of) character [...]’.<sup>18</sup> Yet, for the non-human to be considered of as much importance as human characters in a novel centred on the complexity of human relationships, it takes for the environment to be highlighted and praised. To perform such a tribute to nature, Hardy uses his main protagonist Yeobright who often seems to be in awe of his natural surroundings: ‘as he watched the dead flat of the scenery overpowered him, though he was fully alive to the beauty of the untarnished early summer green which was worn for the nonce by the poorest blade’ (p. 204-5). Indeed, praising the beauty of one’s environment seems to be the first step towards a levelled relationship between nature and humanity that has been deemed superior for centuries. This argument becomes quite explicit a few lines later when the action of observing the landscape suddenly amounts to initiate an ecological reflection on the place of mankind within their environment: ‘there was something in its oppressive horizontality which too much reminded him of the arena of life; it gave him a sense of bare equality, and no superiority to, a single living thing under the sun’ (p. 205). In that particular instance, the symbolic use of horizontality works hand in hand with the ternary rhythm of the sentence which serves to put an emphasis on the clause placed between the commas (‘and no superiority to’), thus performing a literal decentring of man and depriving him of his extraordinary place in the grand scheme of things. Here, I concur with Anne Feuerstein’s reading of *The Return of the Native* and her argument that Hardy ‘recognizes the claims animals have on human attention beyond their imbrication in a larger environment and offers a more horizontal representation that includes animals’.<sup>19</sup> Reconciliation between the human and the natural is therefore made

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<sup>18</sup> John Plotz, ‘Going Local: Characters and Environments in Thomas Hardy’s Wessex’ in *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*, ed. by John Plotz (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 122-43 (p. 123).

<sup>19</sup> Anna Feuerstein, ‘Seeing Animals on Egdon Heath: The Democratic Impulse of Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native*’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 26 (2018), p. 4.



possible through the character of Yeobright whose very name succeeds in reconciling intelligence, (usually deemed an exclusively human characteristic), with the natural world.<sup>20</sup> From seeing one's reflection to seeing one's better version of oneself in natural surroundings, the mirroring effect at work in the numerous descriptions provides the foundations for an ecological thought to emerge and expand.

### **From Reflection to Fusion: A Phenomenological Approach to Victorian Ecology**

For Hardy's approach to be considered ecological, reflection cannot be the final step in the perception process and needs to be enlightened by Merleau-Ponty's own theory of perception. According to the French philosopher, the body is the central tool by which one can perceive one's environment and respond to it: 'but precisely because my body can shut itself off from the world, it is also what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there'.<sup>21</sup> From a phenomenological standpoint, for any connection to take place between humans and their environment, there needs to be an organic body opened to its organic surroundings with which it shares common features: 'we can feel the trees and the roots underfoot, because we are not unlike them, because we have our own forking limbs and our own mineral composition'.<sup>22</sup> The narrator of *The Return of the Native*, commenting on Eustacia's sudden ability to see through her ears, endorses the character's sensations by supporting them with actual testimony of such an experience: 'Dr Kitto was probably under the influence of a parallel fancy when he described his body as having become, by long endeavour, so sensitive to vibrations that he had gained the power of perceiving by it as by ears' (p. 116).<sup>23</sup> In this quotation transpires the idea of a body centralising the perception

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<sup>20</sup> Yeobright is a contraction of 'yeo' as in 'yeoman' (a man holding and cultivating a small landed estate), with 'bright' as in 'smart'.

<sup>21</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 191. Original quotation from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945, repr. 1976), p. 203 : « mais justement parce qu'il peut se fermer au monde, mon corps est aussi ce qui m'ouvre au monde et m'y met en situation. »

<sup>22</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, Vintage Books Edition, 1996 ; repr. 2017), p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> As mentioned in the footnote of the edition, "John Kitto (1804-1854) became deaf as a child and wrote of his adversity."

process and, in so doing, representing the link between the human psyche and the organic non-human.<sup>24</sup>

Yet in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as in Hardy's narrative, the body is not only a medium to access the world but actually becomes the world itself through its permeable nature. The French philosopher talks about 'the Flesh of the World' to refer to this organic whole in which the human body is intermingled:

Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh? [...] the world seen is not 'in' my body, and my body is not 'in' the visible world ultimately: as flesh applied to a flesh, the world neither surrounds it nor is surrounded by it. [...] There is reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one [the body] in the other [the thing]<sup>25</sup>

From that point of view, the human being further loses his central place in the whole scheme of things to become just one organism within what Morton, drawing from Merleau-Ponty, calls the 'mesh'.<sup>26</sup> In Hardy's novel, we find a literary equivalent to this philosophical theory, especially when the landscape is described by the narrator from a distance. In Book First, an unnamed figure is said to be 'so much like an organic part of the entire motionless structure that to see it move would have impressed the mind as a strange phenomenon' (pp. 17-18). This passage quite strikingly echoes Merleau-Ponty's argument for an absence of boundaries between the body and its environment — an argument that Hardy takes care of fully endorsing through the following sentence: 'Immobility being the chief characteristic of that whole which the person formed portion of, the discontinuance of immobility in any quarter suggested confusion' (p. 18). The specific use of terms such as 'part of' or 'portion of' in relation to an organic 'whole' confirms our initial assumption regarding Hardy's intellectual affinity with a philosophical movement that wasn't even born at the moment when *The*

<sup>24</sup> On the subject of embodied perception in *The Woodlanders*, see Cohen.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Merleau Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. by Claude Lefort and translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 138. Original quotation from Merleau Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible* (Paris: Collection Tel, Gallimard, 1964), p. 180 : « Où mettre la limite du corps et du monde puisque le monde est chair ? [...] Le monde vu n'est pas "dans" mon corps, et mon corps n'est pas "dans" le monde visible à titre ultime : chair appliquée à une chair, le monde ne l'entoure ni est entourée par elle. [...] Il y a insertion réciproque et entrelacs de l'un [corps] dans l'autre [chose]. »

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 51.

*Return of the Native* was written. All the characters seem to be wandering in a phenomenological setting, in that ‘flesh of somnolence’ (p. 107) among which Eustacia’s ‘face look[s] from its environment as from a cloud, with no noticeable lines of demarcation between flesh and clothes’ (p. 253). The numerous pastoral scenes offer an obvious opportunity for the author to represent a harmonious fusion between the human and the non-human, whether it be during the characters’ long walks on the heath or during Clym’s furze cutting, as his working-space has to be shared with bees, butterflies, grasshoppers, flies, snakes, or rabbits: ‘his familiars were creeping and winged things, and they seemed to enrol him in their band’ (p. 247). Not only do we witness the fusion of humans and environment in Hardy’s work, but we can also grasp the very process that leads to this fusion. To qualify that process, Adams uses the term ‘interpermeation’ that conveys ‘the vital way in which one thing flows or passes into another thing, dissolves and diffuses throughout the other, pervades the other, affects every aspect of the other, and actually becomes part of the other’.<sup>27</sup> The very verb ‘to permeate’ can be found in Hardy’s work as Clym is described to be ‘permeated with its [the heath’s] scenes, with its substance, and with its odours. He might be said to be its product’ (p. 173). Through this interpermeation process, Clym’s position in the universe suddenly shifts as he goes from a user of the land for production to a simple ‘product’ of that land. In Adams’s view, this feeling of being infiltrated by natural forces is actually a powerful ecological feeling to the extent that it may lead us to ‘understand ourselves and reality differently, and to be more aware and compassionate with others and the natural world [...]’.<sup>28</sup> Opening one’s self to the organic whole is both to become a larger self and to decide to be selfless, that is, to care for who or what is not oneself. Such an altruistic personality is to be found in Hardy’s novel with the character of Venn, the reddleman, who thinks about others’ needs and wellbeing before his own. Interestingly enough, Venn comes across as a very mystic character covered in an organic substance, the reddle, which seems to bring him even closer to the natural world. In several instances, Venn appears to be just another part of the natural environment rather than a human being:

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<sup>27</sup> Will W. Adams, ‘The Interpermeation of Self and World: Empirical Research, Existential Phenomenology, and Transpersonal Psychology’, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*, 30.2 (Fall 1999), 30-67 (p. 45).

<sup>28</sup> Adams, ‘The Interpermeation of Self and World’, p. 39.

The reddleman would now have been quite invisible, even by daylight; the turves standing upon him with the heather upwards, looked precisely as if they were growing. (p. 83)

He [Venn] vanished entirely. The nook among the bambles where his van had been standing was as vacant as ever the next morning, and scarcely a sign remained to show that he had been there, excepting a few straws, and a little redness on the turf, which was washed away by the next storm of rain. (pp. 163-4)

In the blink of an eye, Venn's presence is literally 'washed away' by the storm, as if the man were reduced to the red substance covering his body just as he is reduced to his occupation and reddish appearance by the other characters. As the most selfless of all, Venn is also the most organic character, thus emphasising the link between interpermeation and the emergence of an environmental consciousness. Opposite Venn on the scale of altruism, Eustacia is not for all that excluded from the interpermeation process, especially by the end of the story when her vulnerability makes her humble. As she is going away from her home and from her life with her husband, Eustacia suddenly appears to form an organic whole with the heath she has despised so much:

Between the drippings of the rain from her umbrella to her mantle, from her mantle to the heather, from the heather to the hearth, very similar sounds could be heard coming from her lips; and the tearfulness of the outer scene was repeated upon her face. (p. 346)

Here, the use of anadiplosis offers both a visual and musical illustration of the continuity between herself and the hostile nature surrounding her. As much as she would like to get away, she is experiencing a strong attachment to the land as nature itself echoes her mental state. Reading through all the occurrences previously mentioned, the use of the term 'environment' increasingly sounds out of place since the characters are not only connected to their surroundings but are part of that non-surrounding. Implying that Hardy's acceptance of the term is actually closer to Darwin's use of the term "conditions," Nathan K. Hensley defines Hardy's environment as 'the variable milieus [...] that enable and constrain the human actors attempting to flourish in those particular zones'.<sup>29</sup> In a further attempt to find a fitting term for Hardy's Wessex scenery, I turn to

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<sup>29</sup> Nathan K. Hensley, 'Environment', *Victorian Literature and Culture [Special Issue]*, 46.3/4 (2018), 676-81 (pp. 676; 678).

Albrecht and his work *Earth Emotions*, which helps us qualify this new whole introduced by Merleau-Ponty with the term ‘symbioment’,<sup>30</sup> thus replacing the term ‘environment’ which is to him only ‘a product of erroneous dualistic thinking typical of Anthropocene separation’ (p. 101). When reading descriptions of Hardy’s Wessex, the term ‘symbioment’ actually sounds perfectly in accordance with the idea of a place where the characters’ doings, wanderings, and feelings are so inseparable from the heath’s own secret life.

Walking around the symbioment of Egdon heath, Hardy’s characters are filling the place with memories that, in turn, permeate the natural landscape and become an integral part of its history. Indeed, the phenomenological fusion between man and nature entails another type of fusion, that of human history with natural history, endowing the heath with an anthropological dimension. Because humans and nature are parts of a same unified whole, what man remembers, nature remembers too, and a particular place may even have the power to bring vivid memories back to one’s mind:

The expression of the place, the tone of the hour, were precisely those of many such occasions in days gone by; and these antecedent similarities fostered the illusion that she, who was there no longer, would come out to welcome him. (p. 310)

Not only can the heath remind one of previous intimate moments shared in its midst, but the entire natural world seems to be aware of each individual’s history, since it is so intermingled with its own: ‘He frequently walked the heath alone, when the past seized upon him its shadowy hand, and held him there to listen to its tale’ (p. 373). Here, the personification of the past gives the reader the impression that it is the heath itself that seizes Clym in order to refresh his memory and unite his personal history with that of his native place. Interestingly enough, this anthropological approach to nature is introduced by Buell as one of the four characteristics of an environmental text where ‘the Non-human is present not only as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history [...]’ (p. 7). From an ecological perspective, linking anthropology to biology does not amount to placing man at the centre of natural history but rather to point at man’s humble and short-lived

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<sup>30</sup> See Glenn A. Albrecht, *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019) for the full definition of “symbioment” as the “recognition that all life exists within living systems at various scales. There is no “outside” for life forms within the biosphere”, p. 201. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

achievements within the great history of all beings. That particular history, according to Darwin, is not to be found in books written by humans, but rather within the earth itself that, like Hardy's heath, has a tale to tell: 'I look at the natural geological record, as a history of the world imperfectly kept [...]'.<sup>31</sup> Darwin's perspective on a historically-charged geology was one among many arguments that appealed to Hardy at the time and that found their poetical translation in his work: 'in the heath's bareness to the farmer lay its fertility to the historian' (p. 20). The use of an agricultural metaphor to evoke the work of the historian is here a striking example of Hardy's desire to fuse the natural world and the human world together so as to show that they cannot be conceived or fathomed separately. The heath's ground then becomes a geological palimpsest on which the history of its inhabitants has been written throughout the years: 'Those of the dyed barbarians who had chosen the cultivable tracts were, in comparison with those who had left their marks here, as writers on paper beside writers on parchment' (p. 373). As soon as human history is intermingled with natural history, then our own responsibility towards the non-human becomes a matter of self-preservation as much as of natural preservation. If a feeling of closeness to nature is not enough to trigger ecological action, the phenomenological certainty of being embedded within that nature seems to be the final stepping-stone towards environmental ethics.

### **Feeling *Concerned*: Reciprocity as Prerequisite for Ecological Action**

According to the OED, to feel concerned is both to be 'troubled or anxious' about something and to be 'involved' in something. Through our exploration of Merleau-Ponty's "Flesh of the World", we have argued that humans are indeed very much involved in the grand scheme of the universe and being conscious of that involvement may trigger some eco-anxiety, that is some concern for the future of our one and only symbioment, the planet. Yet for any such concern to arise, there needs to be an emotional (spiritual) fusion added to the previously mentioned physical (organic) fusion with the natural world. Contemporary eco-critics such as Albrecht are actually showing how one's natural surroundings are likely to have an impact on one's emotional state. If Hardy is well known for his descriptions of a nature reflecting human emotions,<sup>32</sup> his tendency to depict

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: MacMillan Collector's Library, 1859; repr. 2017), p. 337. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

<sup>32</sup> See Nishimura, p. 909.

nature's impact on these emotions is not to be neglected. Indeed, in Hardy's Wessex, a heath can make 'a contented woman a poet, a suffering woman a devotee, a pious woman a psalmist, even a giddy woman thoughtful [...]' (p. 73). As conveyed in this example, the effect of one's living environment on one's emotions may be positive or negative depending on the character's initial state of mind or relation to that particular place. In the case of Eustacia, for instance, the heath is more often than not responsible for her feeling of loneliness and imprisonment, as if 'the wings of her soul were broken by the cruel obstructiveness of all about her' (p. 346). The young woman's own relationship with Clym is being threatened by the heath as she 'cannot endure it' while he 'would rather live on these hills than anywhere else in the world' (p. 185). Throughout that particular dialogue, the reader gets the impression that the heath has come between the two lovers and that the communication between them is consequently broken. The melody of their respective discourses becomes dissonant as Eustacia's accumulation of harsh plosives is answered by Clym's alliteration of soft fricatives:

“[...]‘The heath is a cruel taskmaster to me’.  
‘[...]To me, it is most exhilarating, and strengthening, and soothing’”. (p. 185)

Yet, what would be better than an eclipse of the moon observed from the intimacy of the heath to enhance the two lovers' feelings for one another and blind them to their divergent needs? Indeed, perfect emotional harmony may also be achieved with the help of one's environment when natural phenomena all work together to give the lovers a sense of belonging, both to one another and to their native land:

They formed a very comely picture of love at full flush, as they walked along the valley that late afternoon, the sun sloping down on their right, and throwing their thin spectral shadows, tall as poplar trees, far out across the furze and ferns. (p. 204)

In Hardy's novel, natural forces actually seem to work for the good of those who feel a special bound with the place they inhabit. Such is the case for Thomasin who hardly ever left her native heath and who relies on it for comfort as she mourns her husband: 'the spring came and calmed her; the summer came and soothed her; the autumn arrived, and she began to be comforted' (p. 372). The narrator's choice of assessing Thomasin's grieving process in terms of seasons

rather than months shows how nature, rather than time, heals all wounds on Egdon heath. From an organic to a psychological connection to nature, the characters in *The Return of the Native* allow themselves to engage in a reciprocal relationship in which ‘the environment is determined by the human just as the human is determined by the environment.’<sup>33</sup> Addressing this particular approach and its ecological implication, Levine argues that Hardy’s work is thereby given ‘a sense of universal connectedness — both material and moral’.<sup>34</sup>

As soon as one realises that one lives in a symbioment rather than in an environment, then every action becomes an interaction and, as Vakoch and Castillon declare, ‘all being is “interbeing”’ (p. 73). This sense of reciprocity probably finds its roots in the often distorted Darwinian concept of ‘struggle for existence’ which actually argues that ‘the structure of every organic being is related, in the most essential yet often hidden manner, to that of all other organic beings’ (p. 90). In Hardy’s plot, as in Darwin’s theoretical development, no human action is taken separately from the environment in which it happens, as a reminder that all of our actions may have serious consequences. Answering MacNeill Miller’s condemnation of Hardy’s inability to recognise that ‘human beings may be working to cocreate the landscape that sustains so many species’ (pp. 165-6), I must underline that, on Egdon heath, the simple action of indulging in a gambling game when the sun is down is enough to attract ‘the attention of every bird within eyeshot, every reptile not yet asleep, and set the surrounding rabbits curiously watching from hillocks at a safe distance’ (p. 107). Here, non-human activities on the heath seem to be disturbed by Venn and Wildeve’s game to the point that a moth has to take it upon itself to extinguish their lantern so that they stop playing. Moreover, the numerous interruptions of the game by heath-croppers that Venn has to chase away is another clue that points at the negative impact of the two men’s activity on their surroundings. On several instances, the narrator takes care to describe Egdon heath as a shared space in which an action on one organism may change the living conditions of another drastically: ‘he unlocked the gate, and found that a spider had already constructed a large web, tying the door to the lintel, on the supposition that it was never to be opened again’ (p. 311). Now that Clym is back, the smart spider will have to find another protected spot to build her webby home and the reader suddenly feels a speck of injustice for the creature whose living space depended on the stability of a man’s

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<sup>33</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, “Dendrography and Ecological Realism”, *Victorian Studies*, 58.4 (2016), 696-718 (p. 701).

<sup>34</sup> Levine, p. 39.



marriage. If, as Buell suggests, ‘the human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest’ (p. 7) in an environmental text, then this particular instance brings Hardy’s novel a step closer to its qualification as green writing. Human interests are actually pushed into the background when natural forces are seen in turn to have an impact on human lives, to the point that a character like Eustacia tends to blame all her misfortunes on her surroundings: ‘O the cruelty of putting me into this imperfect, ill-conceived world! I was capable of much; but I have been injured and blighted and crushed by things beyond my control’ (p. 346). As we have seen before, the interaction between man and his environment may be beneficial for one, as for instance when outdoor activity helps Clym’s eyesight to gradually improve (p. 392). At other times, however, natural phenomena such as a heavy rain or a river overflow may well directly lead to the death of human characters, namely Eustacia and Wildeve who are drowned in Shadwater Weir during a storm. In that tragic event, some may see natural forces getting back at two characters who have always acted without the least concern for their environment, while sparing Clym, the one who has always respected his native land he chose over Paris. Whether we support that interpretation or not, Hardy’s depiction of human-non-human interactions is undoubtedly part of a larger moral reflection on human’s responsibility towards the environment. Through his friendly reminder that we need to think about the consequences of our actions on the non-human world, Hardy lays the foundation of the very modern understanding of ‘the ecological thought’ as ‘coexistentialism’.<sup>35</sup>

The third point in Buell’s definition of an environmental text is a sense of ‘human accountability to the environment’ (p. 7), which echoes our exploration of the double-meaning of ‘concern’ as both involvement in and preoccupation with the natural world. Without a sense of belonging, Adams argues, no environmental ethics can ever emerge in the human mind since ‘as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration’.<sup>36</sup> The refusal to conceive one’s life in terms of its reciprocity to the environment always leads to conflict and disharmony in Hardy’s text; the most striking example being the gambling scene previously mentioned. As Wildeve and Venn are practicing an immoral game with other people’s money and without the least concern for the creatures around

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<sup>35</sup> Morton, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Will W. Adams, ‘Nature’s Participatory Psyche: a Study of Consciousness in a Shared Earth Community’, *The Humanist Psychologist*, 38 (2010), 15-39 (p. 16).

them, the narrator stresses ‘the incongruity between the men’s deeds and their environment’ (p. 229):

The soft juicy vegetation of the hollow in which they sat, gently rustling in the warm air, the uninhabited solitude, the chink of guineas, the rattle of the dice, the exclamation of the players, combined such a bizarre exhibition of circumstances as had never before met on those hills since they first arose out of the deep. (p. 229)

The rupture between the human characters and their environment is further strengthened by Wildeve’s aggressive behaviour towards non-human beings that he only sees as props for his game. In that spirit, the man decides to fetch some glow worms and to use them for their light since their lantern has been extinguished by a moth. When the prop glow worms fail to act as a proper lantern, he then gets mad and becomes disrespectful towards the creatures: ‘why don’t you burn, you little fool?’ (p. 230). When one is done reading and can think about this scene in relation to Wildeve’s tragic ending, then one tends to think that the character might have learned ‘by bitter experience that the organism that destroys its environment destroys itself’.<sup>37</sup> Wildeve’s conflictual relationship with nature acts as a counterpoint to Hardy’s imagination of an (e)co-happiness in which caring for one’s environment would be caring for oneself, as in any cooperation systems. This ecological utopia can be achieved by characters who allow themselves to have ‘experiences of intimate relating to nature’ (Vakoch and Castrillon, p. 131) and, like Venn, to feel ‘in direct communication with regions unknown to man’ (p. 88) just by observing a landscape. As we read through Hardy’s novel, the first step in that communion process seems to be the decision to shift one’s perspective and try and understand the world ‘beyond the human’,<sup>38</sup> according to non-human values. From the narrator’s point of view, ‘to dwell on a heath without studying its meanings [is] like wedding a foreigner without learning his tongue’ (p. 73). Choosing to look at one’s environment with fresh eyes and a desire to learn from that environment allows some of the characters to feel protected, rather than threatened, by natural forces. As opposed to Eustacia’s, Thomasin’s relation to the heath is representative of what W.H. Auden defined in 1947 as ‘topophilia’, that is ‘the attention given to the love of particular and peculiar places’ (p. 120): ‘To her there were not, as to Eustacia, demons in the

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<sup>37</sup> Adams, ‘Nature’s Participatory Psyche’, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Feuerstein, p. 18.

air, and malice in every bush and bough. The drops which lashed her face were not scorpions, but prosy rain; Egdon in the mass was no monster whatever [...]’ (Hardy, *Return of the Native*, p. 355). Moments of perfect harmony between Thomasin and her environment pervade the story to the point that, walking through a door, she becomes the very link between the sun and the heath: ‘the oblique band of sunlight which followed her through the door became the young wife well. It illuminated her as her presence illuminated the heath’ (p. 209). Such chiasmatic structures are typical of Hardy’s vision of a human being able to give something back to a nurturing nature and eventually, to ‘effect alterations that serve a mutually-supportive, sustainable environment’ (Parham, pp. 35-6). In Hardy’s Wessex, only when one is concerned *with* the heath can one feel concerned *for* it and consequently, feel the need to preserve it.

### **To Conclude: Hardy and the Ecological Paradox**

Considered from an eco-critical perspective, Hardy’s pastoral scenes and depictions of long walks among the English heath take up a meaning that goes far beyond the author’s tribute to his native land. In a Victorian age when progress meant inventing new ways of overcoming limitations imposed by nature, the ecological thought seems to have emerged as an opposing force to that unilateral mode of thinking. What if progress actually meant cooperating with nature and observing it to know which way to go forward? The mirroring effect at work in *The Return of the Native* symbolises this new approach both consisting in looking *at* nature to find one’s alter-*eco*, and in looking *up* to nature to reconcile the human with the non-human. To a Victorian person who might feel overwhelmed by such a drastic change of scenery, Hardy, as if drawing from the Isa Upanishad,<sup>39</sup> writes between the lines of his novel a very comforting maxim: ‘who sees all beings in his own self, and his own self in all beings, loses all fear’.<sup>40</sup> Thinking in an ecological way in the nineteenth century is coming to the realisation that one is not separate from one’s environment, that if one can see oneself in nature, then one may not be looking at it from outside but actually from inside, as an integral part of it. In such a light, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology

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<sup>39</sup> The Isha Upanishad is a sacred Hindu Text. For lack of space, this won’t be dealt with at length. On the relation between this text and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, see Adams; and on the role of the text to illuminate our contemporary ecological debate, see Eknath, Easwaran, and Michael N. Nagler, eds., *The Upanishads*, The Classics of Indian Spirituality, 2nd ed (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007).

<sup>40</sup> Adams, ‘The Interpermeation of Self and World’, p. 64.

of perception and our modern understanding of ecology suddenly seem to share the same Victorian root, that is a strong sense of belonging with nature: ‘it is only when intimacy is felt palpably as no separation that its essential connection with care becomes evident’ (Vakoch and Castrillon, p. 11). To go from an ecological thought to an actual ecological commitment, there needs to be a feeling of involvement and that, only, will urge one to protect what is so intrinsic to one’s own existence. This very argument that pervades Hardy’s work and tells us a lot about his own ecological thinking, raises an important, yet unpopular, issue at the core of the ecological movement, that of the anthropocentric dimension of a supposedly eco-centric cause. Indeed, what if humans were actually separate from nature and couldn’t suffer the consequences of nature destruction? What if global warming was not threatening human habitat and safety? Then would humans really care for their environment? Would ecology ever have emerged as an utter disinterested movement? Darwin would likely have answered negatively to that question, since he couldn’t believe that ‘any animal in the world perform[ed] an action for the exclusive good of another of a distinct species’ (p. 324). Looking back at the origins of ecology through the reading of Hardy’s novel, one is both reminded of the paradox at the heart of ecological thinking and of the long way we still need to go in order to protect nature, for the sake of nature.

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